

BEGC-101, Indian Classical Literature

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BEGC-101

Indian Classical

Indira Gandhi

Literature

National Open University

School of Humanities

Block

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KALIDASA: *Abhijnana Shakuntala*

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

This is a Course that will remind us of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and lying on our grandmother's lap while listening to tales of old. It brings to us old memories of love between a King and a commoner, the mystery of the missing signet ring, a son disowned because of a memory lapse as a result of a curse; of court intrigues and the disrobing of a woman of gentle birth till a grand battle between cousins is waged; and of the love between a young Brahman and a Courtesan who is also pursued by a vile courtier; and last but not the least – one of the “Five Great Epics of Tamil Literature”, *Cilappatikaram*, which is again a story of the love between a married man and a courtesan and her abandonment by him and his eventual death. So, we have three texts in *Sanskrit*, and one in Tamil. Two are epics – The *Mahābhāratam*, and *Cilappatikāram*, which is a Tamil text; while *Abhijñāna Shakuntalā*, and *Mrichchakatika* are *Sanskrit* dramas.

So, we hope you are ready to embark on a magical, mystical journey through the ages.



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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 1 of this course on Classical Indian Literature will begin with **Kalidasa's** best known Sanskrit play *Abhijñāna Shākuntalā*, which tells the tale of a young girl raised in a hermitage by a sage and who is actually, the daughter of an extremely learned sage *Vishwamitra* and a celestial dancer *Menaka*. King *Duhsanta* is hunting in the forest near the hermitage where *Shakuntala* lives with the hermit *Kanva*, raised as his daughter, after being abandoned by *Vishwamitra* and *Menaka* for various reasons. He comes to the hermitage unadorned as a commoner and falls in love with *Shakuntala*. *Shakuntala* and the King get married in the hermitage and she is with child. He has to leave for his Kingdom but he gives *Shakuntala* his signet ring as a token of his love for her. However, as fate would have it, *Shakuntala* is lost in the thought of the King while, *Durvasa Rishi* a learned saint with an extreme temper is calling out to *Shakuntala*. She obviously does not hear him and irritated by her lack of response, he curses her saying:

You who do not notice me,

A hoard of merit standing at your doorstep,

Because you are lost in thoughts of one

To the exclusion of all else,

You shall be lost in his thoughts:

Though you goad his memory hard,

He shall fail to remember you,

Even as a man drunk remembers not

Thereafter, the tale he told before.

When the girls at the hermitage plead with him, he modifies his curse and tells *Shakuntala* that the King will remember her when he sees the ring. Inevitably, *en route* to the Palace, *Shakuntala* loses the ring. It falls off her finger and is swallowed by a fish which is caught and later gutted by a fisherman who finds the ring and wears it, till he is spotted by a palace guard who recognises the ring and brings the fisherman whom he believes to be a thief, before the King. Meanwhile when *Shakuntala* reaches the Palace the King has no recollection of

her but agrees to let her stay in the Palace till the child is born.

When the fisherman is brought before the King, *Durvasa Rishi's* curse is lifted and he remembers *Shakuntala*. There are other events at play but this is the main story line of the play. Eventually King *Duhsanta*, *Shakuntala* and their son are reunited and they return to the palace.

So let's now, go through the units in this block for a better understanding of the play, the cultural ethos of a long ago time that may have existed in the world of myths and our collective imagination. Do read the translated text before you start reading the Units as this will give you a better grasp of the play. You are expected to read **Kalidasa's** *Abhijñāna Shakuntalā*, translated by **Chandra Rajan** called **Kalidasa: *The Loom of Time***, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989).

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UNIT 1 INDIAN AESTHETICS: AN

INTRODUCTION

Structure

1.0

Objectives

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Introduction

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Indian Classical Drama

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Sanskrit Drama

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Classical *Sanskrit* Playwrights

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Kalidasa

1.9

Let Us Sum Up

1.10 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at drama, specifically Classical Indian drama and its origin, role, and significance. Beginning with its oral tradition to the later religious performances, the unit will examine drama as a performative social activity aimed at particular audiences. We will then discuss *Sanskrit* dramas, its various components and end with an overview of major *Sanskrit* dramatists such as **Bhasa**, **Bhavbhuti** and **Sudraka**. This unit will conclude with a brief discussion on **Kalidasa**

as the next unit will deal with him in detail. The objective of this unit is to offer a concise idea about Indian drama with a specific focus on *Sanskrit* plays as I'm sure most of us do not have much knowledge about *Sanskrit* drama *per se*.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Like any literary genre, drama has its own history both in terms of its origin and evolution. The drama that we see or study in classrooms today did not begin as such. As a literary composition, drama usually tells us a story, but not just through words, in the form of dialogues, but also through gestures, movements, and facial expressions of the characters, dances, costumes, background landscape, music, stage setting etc. Drama is, therefore, a performative art that includes many components and participants such as the playwright, actors, director, audience, costume designer, make-up artists etc. In the next section we shall take a look at what is called Indian Classical Drama.

1.2 INDIAN CLASSICAL DRAMA

All major civilisations had their own version of drama such as the Greek, the Chinese and the Indians. One of the major problems in determining an origin date for literary traditions such as drama is that we cannot pinpoint the exact year of its genesis rather, we can trace its influence and evolution to arrive 5



Kalidasa: *Abhijnana*

at a more or less realistic understanding of the origins of drama. The Indian

Shakuntala

dramatic tradition was influenced by the dramatic elements found in the *Vedas*, in dialogue hymns and *Vedic* rituals. Thus, it is in the *Vedic* era (1500 - 1000

BCE) that we see dramatic elements that will come to define drama in the years to come and eventually usher in a *genre* known as Indian Classical Drama as we know it. Even the epics, such as the *Mahabharata* support the existence of performers or *nata* as early as 400 CE. However, the most extant treatise on Indian drama is the *Natyashastra* by **Bharatamuni**, which emerged in 3rd CE. **Bharata** ascribes a divine origin to the dramatic tradition, which highlights its *Vedic* religious beginnings. The very existence of such a text suggests that it was the culmination of a fairly long process of dramatic development taking place at that time.

The Greek invasion of the Indian subcontinent has led a few critics such as **Weber** to assert a Greek influence on Indian drama. There are certainly some similarities such as the plot being mainly centered on historical, mythical figures but the Indian tradition has the added element of supernatural figures such as gods and goddesses that populate the world of drama. The division of the Play into Acts and Scenes, use of the Chorus, developments of stock characters demonstrate this Greek influence on all drama. However, major differences also exist between the two traditions, specifically the absence of tragedy in the Indian dramatic tradition. Greek drama's adherence to the **Three Unities of time, place and action** is not strictly observed in Indian drama where the action shifts from earthly spaces to heavenly ones, taking place across many years as well. Furthermore, dance and song are an important part of Indian drama and not found in the Greek counterpart. Other scholars highlight the influence of Buddhist and Jain traditions in the formalising of the Indian dramatic tradition.

Thus, we can conclude that there might have been a strain of the Greek influence along with influences from other literary traditions and cultures such as the Buddhist and Jain traditions that worked together with ancient *Vedic* ones to create the *Classical Indian drama* as we know it today. This may be particularly true of the Tamil Epic *Cilappatikaram* which is influenced also by the Buddhist and Jain traditions as we shall see in the fourth block. In the next section, we shall look at *Sanskrit* Drama.

1.3 SANSKRIT DRAMA

In this section, we shall examine *Sanskrit* drama in a more detailed

manner.

A vast country like India cannot have a singular dramatic tradition, given as we discussed before the various influences on the *genre* as well as the diversity of the subcontinent and how these communities received and adapted drama.

However, one of the most prominent dramatic traditions to have emerged is *Sanskrit* drama. Others include the dance drama of southern India as well the *Sanskrit* tradition of southern India such as the *Koodiyattam* in Kerala.

According to the *Natyashastra*, a dramatic work's purpose was to provide not just entertainment and pleasure but instruction, wealth, justice, and spiritual liberation. That's why *Sanskrit* drama does not have a tragic ending because in Hindu cosmology, death is not the end but a means to either achieve spiritual liberation from the cycle of life or be reborn till it is achieved. Moreover, the 6

Rasa or the aesthetic sentiment is an important aspect of *Sanskrit* drama, and



can be best defined as the audience's refined emotional response evoked by **IndianAesthetics: An**

the play. *Rasa* is broadly composed of *vibhava*, *anubhava*, *vyabhicharibhava*, **Introduction**

and *sthayibhava*, which are the different types of emotional responses to a work of art. Alternatively *rasa* can be explained as a blissful aesthetic experience achieved via drama, and is seen as *Sanskrit* drama's highest purpose.

Natyashastra also elucidates the different types of plays, the major type (*Rupaka*) or the minor type (*uparupaka*). *Rupaka* consists of ten varieties out of which the *Nataka*, are plays based on myths and heroic tales, and the *Prakarana*, are plays based on fictitious stories and where less important characters are dominant. *Sanskrit* drama's idealised plot structure consists of five transitions that lead to a final culmination of the events depicted. The first is the "origin" (*mukha*), which states the seeds or the beginning of the plot; the second is the "incident" (*pratimukha*), which develops the plotline further by showing both good and bad events; the third is "germ" (*garbha*) where good actions/events seem to lead towards the "aim" (*phala*); the fourth is "crisis"

(*vimarsa*) where bad actions/events seem to outweigh the good and strays away from the "aim"; the fifth is "completion" (*nirvahana*) that brings together all the different narratives in the play to a definitive conclusion.

One of the unique aspects of *Sanskrit* drama is its bilingual nature. The protagonists who belonged to the upper castes such as *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* spoke in *Sanskrit* whereas characters from other sections of society such as soldiers, servants, women and children etc. spoke in the various *Prakrit* languages. The stock characters encountered here such as the *Sutradhar* (director), the *Nayak* (hero), the *Nayaki* (Heroine), and the *Vidusaka* (jester) speak either in *Sanskrit* or *Prakrit* depending on their caste, class, gender, and age. Such a linguistic construction of the play restricted the variety of people who could watch and enjoy it. Thus, the audience was mostly limited to a refined circle of upper castes such as the royalty, aristocrats, *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*, leading to royal patronages. Even the *Natyashastra* states that the ideal spectators should be educated and noble men, all four castes could watch a play as long as they were seated separately. It is no surprise then that *Sanskrit* drama failed to be a people's drama such as those in ancient Greece and medieval England. However, this is not to say no other form of drama existed or evolved in India outside of the *Sanskritic* tradition, folk theater and street plays (*nukkad natak*) abound even now and are a testament to the vitality of contemporary Indian theatre.

Another aspect that differentiates *Sanskrit* drama from its European counterpart is the composition of actors. Unlike the ban on female actors in European classical drama, the *Sanskritic* tradition did not have such prohibitions that required male actors to perform the role of female leads, and drama could be performed by men alone, women alone or a mix of both, depending on the plot. Despite its many

unique characteristics, the major drawback of *Sanskrit* drama was its linguistic barrier as well as the strict adherence to the rules of dramaturgy that did not leave much space for individual imagination and experiments with the *genre*. Its failure to transition into popular art because of the decline of *Sanskrit* as a living language led to the gradual disinterest in *Sanskritic* works. However, *Sanskrit* plays are still being written and performed in India by playwrights such as **Manmohan Acharya** (*Arjuna-Pratijnaa*, *Shrita-kamalam*, *Pada-pallavam*, *Divya-Jayadevam*, *Pingalaa*, *Mrtyuh*, *Sthitaprajnah*, *Tantra-mahasaktih*, *Purva-sakuntalam*, *Uttara-7*



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Kalidasa: *Abhijnana*

sakuntalam and *Raavanah*); **Vidyadhar Shastri** (*Purnanandam*, *Kalidainyam*

Shakuntala

and *Durbala Balam*) and **Prafulla Kumar Mishra** (*Chitrangada* and *Karuna*), that are a living testimony to the endurance of the *genre*. *Sanskrit* literature may have failed to become popular literature but it is still studied in academia and seen as an important aspect of Indian culture and tradition. Let us look at the Classical *Sanskrit* Dramatists of ancient times next.

1.4 CLASSICAL SANSKRIT PLAYWRIGHTS

Sanskrit drama is defined by the works of dramatists such as **Sudraka**, **Bhasa**, **Bhavbhuti**, **Harsha**, and **Kalidasa** to name a few. They have survived through thousands of years because of their literary prowess in depicting characters, settings, plots in their own individualistic way. Almost all the great *Sanskrit* playwrights benefitted from royal patronage or were

part of royal households or even of kings. Let us begin by talking about **Bhasa** first.

1.5 BHASA

Bhasa (3rd- 4th CE) was a Sanskrit playwright, preceding **Kalidasa**, believed to have lived in the city of Ujjain. Relatively unknown to Sanskrit scholars except through references in other dramatic works, **Bhasa**'s works saw the light of the day in 1909 when the play *Swapnavasavadatta* (*Vision of Vasavadatta*) was discovered by **Pandit Anandalvar** of the Archaeological Survey of Mysore. In 1913 a total of thirteen plays were discovered in an old library in Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) by **T Ganapati Shastri**.

Bhasa drew his inspiration from epics such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Purana* and semi-historical legends and figures. **Bhasa**'s plays do not follow the *Natyashastra* very strictly, even breaking dramatic conventions.

This has led some critics to conclude that **Bhasa**'s plays were written before **Bharatamuni**'s treatise, others see this as an indication of **Bhasa**'s poetic experiments and disregard for dramatic conventions.

Swapnavasavadatta is his most famous play that depicts the story of King Udayana, who must choose between marrying for love his beloved Vasavadatta or the daughter of a neighboring king, Princess Padmavati, for political gain.

In the play **Bhasa** combines romance with political intrigue creating a new kind of drama. Along with traditional dramas, **Bhasa** also wrote short plays, one act plays, and monologues.

Among the many dramatic conventions that **Bhasa** broke was depicting a tragic ending in his plays. Both *Uru-bhanga* (*Breaking of the Thighs*) and *Karnabhara* (*Karna's Task*), which deal with the stories of Duryodhana and Karna respectively, end on tragic notes. The heroes of these two plays are traditionally seen as villains or anti-heroes in the *Mahabharata* however, **Bhasa** treats them with sympathy and shows a side of their character hitherto not dealt with in the epic. Furthermore, **Bhasa** does not shy away from showing violent acts on stage, which was another *Natyashastra* convention that he disregards. We shall take a quick look at **Sudraka** next.

1.6 SUDRAKA

Sudraka, literally translated as the little servant, was a poet-king who

lived 8

in Ujjain in the 2nd CE. He is well known for his *Prakarana* play,



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Mrichchhakatika (*The Little Clay Cart*), which is an extended version of **IndianAesthetics: An**

Bhasa's incomplete play *Charudattam* (*Charudatta*). The ten act play tells the **Introduction**

love story of a Brahmin merchant, *Charudatta* and a courtesan *Vasantasenâ*, whose union is thwarted by a jealous suitor. Even with a few serious elements, the play ends happily and is primarily seen as a mix of romance and humour.

It also offers an interesting and realistic picture of urban society and the complex social structure of that time. We will be studying **Sudraka's** *Mrichhakatika* in Block III of this course. His other plays include *Vinavasavadatta*, and a *Bhana* (short one-act monologue), and *Padmaprabhritaka*. Incidentally, the 1984 Hindi movie *Utsav*, directed by Girish Karnad is believed to have been based largely on *Mrichhakatika*. **Bhavbhuti** will be examined in the subsequent section.

1.7 BHAVBHUTI

Bhavabhuti, a major dramatist of the later Sanskrit dramatic period, was the court poet of King Yashovarman of Kannauj, in north India in 8th CE. He too wrote plays based on the Ramayana, such as the *Mahaviracharita* (*Exploits of a Great Hero*), which depicts the early life of Rama and *Uttaramcharita* (*The Latter History of Rama*), which shows the final years of Rama's life as written in the Uttara Kanda of the Ramayana. Both the plays consist of seven acts written in the Nataka style.

His third drama, *Malatimadhava* (*Malati and Madhava*), is a *Prakarana* play centered on the love story of *Malati*, the daughter of a minister and *Madhavya*, her beloved. *Malati* is set to be married off to *Nandana* in accordance with the king's wishes. The powerful suitor as well as a mix-up with another couple interrupts the union of *Malati* and *Madhava*, which is finally resolved with the aid of magic. The use of the supernatural makes this play a one of a kind drama that skillfully combines romance with horror.

Bhavabhuti's long poetic descriptions are seen as mere embellishment that does not add anything to the drama, but tends to obfuscate his clear and simple diction. He is known for completely doing away with the *vidusaka* and thus eliminating the comic element in his plays. Critics see this as a reflection of his temperament that could not portray humour effectively. **Bhavabhuti** instead compensates for it by highlighting the supernatural and the grotesque thus evoking the *rasa Bibhasta* (disgust) and *Raudra* (anger) in his works. His plays have the unique combination of heroism, romance and horror unrivaled in Sanskrit literature. The next section will deal with a brief look at **Kalidasa** as we place him in the tradition.

1.8 KALIDASA

One of best-known Sanskrit dramatists in the world, whose works have been adapted and translated into numerous languages and forms, **Kalidasa's** poetic skills are unparalleled even today. Basing his works on the Vedas, the Purana and the epics, **Kalidasa** reimagined and breathed new life into the plots that he took from these works.

His works include notable plays, such as *Mâlâvikâgnimitram* (*Pertaining to Mâlâvikâ and Agnimitra*), and *Vikramorvasiyam* (*Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi*). He also wrote epic poems such as *Raghuvams'a* (*Dynasty of 9*



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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

Raghu) and Kumârasambhava (Birth of 'Kumara' or S'ubrahmanya) along

Shakuntala

with Khandakavyas (minor poems). However, his most popular and famous work remains the Abhijñâna Shâkuntalam (The Recognition of Shakuntala).

We will not discuss the details of his work and aesthetics here. This will be dealt with in the next unit.

1.9 LET US SUM UP

*In this unit, we have learnt about the history and development of Indian Classical drama. Special focus has been given to Sanskrit drama, with comparisons and differences drawn between the Indian and European dramatic tradition to give an overall awareness about drama. We have also been apprised of other important Sanskrit playwrights and that has helped us understand the tradition beyond **Kalidasa** and has offered us an appreciation on the diversity and range of classical Sanskrit literature.*

1.10 QUESTIONS

1.

What do you think is the origin of Indian Classical Drama?

2.

What do you understand by the term Sanskrit Drama?

3.

Name some of the prominent Classical Sanskrit playwrights and attempt a critical analysis of their works.



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UNIT 2

KALIDASA: AN OVERVIEW

Structure

2.0

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Kalidasa's Background

2.2.1

The Problem of Date

2.2.2

The City of Ujjain and its Relevance in Kalidasa 2.3

Kalidasa' Literary Background

2.4

Kalidasa and his Works

2.5

Epic and Drama

2.5.1

The Original story of Shakuntalaa from the Epic Mahabharata 2.5.2

The Question of Form

2.6

Ancient Indian Aesthetics

2.6.1

Dramatic Art

2.6.2

Bharata's Nat yashastra

2.7

Let Us Sum Up

*Hints to Check Your Progress**Glossary***2.0 OBJECTIVES**

*This unit will acquaint you with **Kalidasa**, the man, the myth and the creative genius. It will also lead us into a discussion on the probable time of **Kalidasa** and the place where he lived. In addition, **Kalidasa**'s literary influences would be mapped to help us place the poet in the vast expanse of ancient literature.*

*For a precise understanding of **Kalidasa**'s art, attempt has also been made in this unit to take a closer look at the original story of Shakuntala available in the epic Mahabharata. We will also see, at a more general level, how the play, Abhijnana Shakuntalam of **Kalidasa** departs from the original source of the epic. A critical discussion on aspects of epic and drama might make us aware about the workings of the two forms/ genres in question – the epic and the drama. Finally, a view of ancient Indian aesthetics will apprise us of what was being written during the ancient period and the parameters against which literary texts were judged.*

2.1 INTRODUCTION

*Very little information is available on **Kalidasa** the person. The result of research done on him is based on associations and references that are available in works identified to have been written by him. **Kalidasa**'s texts help us understand his world and they give us clues to his time. Generally, in approaching a text our movement of inquiry is from the outside world of the writer to the inside world of the text. In the case of **Kalidasa**, however, the opposite takes place.*

Because we have scarce information about his surroundings we are forced to look at his text first and then make our impression about the world he inhabited.

*Hence, an inversion takes place in the case of **Kalidasa**. In **Kalidasa**, the movement is thus, from inside the textual world outwards and it makes interpreting and finding meaning more exploratory and open-ended, there being no pre-determined ideas influencing the view of **Kalidasa**. Secondly, **Kalidasa** 11*



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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

appears conscious about the existing literary trends and stylistics. This helped

Shakuntala

him focus on the themes associated with courtly life as well as with the gods.

*His subject was lofty (it is believed he was among the nine gems/ navratnas, in the court of **Chandragupta II**) and as a court poet he followed the tradition of courtly drama with an eye on the whims and fancies of the nobility. Was, then, **Kalidasa** an elitist poet? Interestingly, **Kalidasa** emphasises poignant human emotions in his works; this might have struck a chord with the ordinary people. Yet, **Kalidasa** should be seen under the larger paradigm of classical writing.*

2.2 KALIDASA'S BACKGROUND

*It is still important that we try and place **Kalidasa**, and locate him in some time frame so, let's try and do that. Since **Kalidasa** belonged to the ancient period and much of information about it has been lost over centuries, it is difficult to gain the required details. In fact, dates alluding to his time of birth span centuries. Scholarship on his probable dates varies.*

2.2.1 The Problem of Date

*It is believed, for instance, that **Kalidasa** was a court poet of **Agnimitra Sunga** (second century BC) who lived during the years of the **Sunga Empire 184***

*BC to 78 BC. According to the belief, **Kalidasa** made **Agnimitra Sunga** the protagonist of his first play **Malavikagnimitran**. Another view of*

Kalidasa's period places him in first century BC during the reign of **Vikramaditya** of Ujjain, around 57 BCT. Thus, **Kalidasa** was associated with King **Vikramaditya** who was the poet's patron. A third opinion establishes **Kalidasa's** date between the fourth and fifth centuries AD—the age of **Chandra Gupta II** who assumed the title of **Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya** after his winning spree in western India.

The lack of knowledge about **Kalidasa** works both as an advantage and disadvantage. The disadvantage is that it leaves us completely in the dark about the writer's ethos. We cannot take help from his surroundings to correlate them with events that take place in his works. It restricts us to the text per se.

However, the advantage is that knowing little about **Kalidasa's** time frees us from the binds of historicity and we are constrained to delve deeper into his texts.

2.2.2 The City of Ujjain and its Relevance in Kalidasa It emerges from the settings of **Kalidasa's** works that he was greatly inspired by the natural beauty of the Malwa region in central India. His fondness for Ujjain particularly comes to the fore in the way he describes the city. **Chandra Rajan** has keenly delineated how the topography of Malwa might have shaped **Kalidasa's** imagination. She says:

The poet describes the topography of the Vindhya and the Malwa region with a loving exactitude as if the landscape lay on the palm of his hand. Malwa, in central India (now part of Madhya Pradesh) is watered by many rivers and streams, rising from the Vindhya ranges and draining its slopes and valleys. Malwa's landscapes streaked by its many rivers and streams with glades and pleasure-gardens on their 12

banks; dotted with groves and meadows and woodlands stretching



along the slopes of the hills; its holy spots and long low hills

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containing caves overgrown with bushes, stir the poet's imagination and evoke in us the beauty that once was.

The Loom of Time, (26)

This tells us that **Kalidasa** has depicted with immense pride scenes from Ujjain in his works. It has made **Kalidasa's** imagery highly evocative. Ujjain with its picturesque sights was also a cultural and commercial hub. It was the centre of learning and intellectual movements where music and the arts were given primacy. While living in Ujjain, **Kalidasa** was directly in touch with the harmony of nature and the world of art associated with the court. The latter also lent high aesthetic appeal to his works.

Additionally, Ujjain was a centre of scientific learning during the period.

Amartya Sen importantly brings to our notice the fact that the city of Ujjain

“in the early centuries of the first millennium CE” was “the location of the

‘principal meridian’ for Indian calendars, serving for Indian astronomers as something like an Indian Greenwich”. Talking of astronomy, **Sen** adds, Technical development clearly had much to do with the location of imperial power as well as scientific research at the time. Ujjain (or Ujjayini as it was then called), as an ancient city moved from its role as the capital of Avanti (later Malwa) in the seventh century BCE to become the capital of the Saka royalty, and most prominently served as the base of the later Gupta dynasty, in the period of the flowering of Indian Mathematics and science.

The Argumentative Indian (40-1)

Along with mathematical and scientific studies Ujjain had to its credit a rich literary tradition of which **Kalidasa** was a part. This is corroborated by **E M**

Forster in his essay “Nine Gems of Ujjain.” Certainly, there was no dearth of wealth in Ujjain, in fact the palaces and gardens described in **Kalidasa** convey the sense of that splendour which the city carried. We note that **Kalidasa** instills both optimism and pride in his characters that seem to be leading organised lives and amassing resources at the same time. An immense scope for progress and riches is discernible in **Kalidasa's** works that conveys the sense of optimism that the period conveyed. This lends an

epic quality to his works as the great feats of kings and the glory of their kingdom become important markers of assertion in **Kalidasa**. The great poet was guided in this by the patronage he received from his benefactors. The plays of **Kalidasa** were performed in court during festivities. This made his preference for lofty subjects justifiable.

Even though **Kalidasa** was a court poet, he was extremely sensitive to the emotions, feelings of those who lived in humble dwellings, in distant corners of the land, away from the court and where the king resided. We note often that **Kalidasa** presents a critique of duty and decorum that represses the passions of an individual. What makes **Kalidasa** stand out amongst writers is that he expresses nuances of human emotions buried deep in the heart of simple men and women. Let us examine **Kalidasa's** literary background next.

2.3 KALIDASA'S LITERARY BACKGROUND

Kalidasa as a literateur was steeped in philosophy, aesthetics, and grammar.

We know this after a careful reading of his *The Loom of Time* and other works.

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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

He was influenced by the epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata from

Shakuntala

which he often drew material for his compositions. Borrowing tales and stories from popular epics was a regular practice among writers of ancient

India. **Bhasa**, for instance, deployed tales from the Mahabharata and wove dramatic plots around them. **Bhasa**'s plays *Urubhangam*, *Karnabharam* are examples of this.

Kalidasa in his prologue to his first play *Malavikagnimitram* acknowledges **Bhasa**, the ancient dramatist, as one of the greatest playwrights of Sanskrit Literature, saying, "How can the work of the modern poet **Kalidasa** be more esteemed than the works of **Bhasa** , **Kaviputra** , **Saumillaka** and others of established fame?" The issue is explained thus by **Kalidasa**—" Everything is not praiseworthy, just because it is old; nor should a poetical work be dismissed just because it is new" (qtd. in **Haksar**). **Kalidasa** is conscious of the value of art and asserts that it is not dependent on antiquity. He uses the rational principal to derive at what is praiseworthy in literature. He emphasised the great value of **Bhasa**'s works. **Haksar** has observed, "**Bhasa** was already well known on the Indian scene over fifteen hundred years ago, when **Kalidasa** had just begun to make his mark" (**Haksar** ix). Both **Bhasa** and **Kalidasa**, along with **Bana Bhatta** (the first Sanskrit novelist and court poet of 7th century Kanauj, north India) contributed to the literary canon of classical Sanskrit literature. **Jayadeva** of the 13th century had the following to say of the trio in his work *Prasanna Raghava*— " Who will not delight in the Muse of Poetry ... the lovely maid whose laughter is **Bhasa** , the guru of poets, whose sport of pleasure is **Kalidasa** , whose Cupid is **Bana**"

(qtd. in **Haksar**, x).

It is evident that **Kalidasa** had studied **Bharata**'s *Natyashastra* as well, although the other theory that goes around suggests that it was **Bharata** that learnt from **Kalidasa** and wrote a treatise on drama based on representations in **Kalidasa**'s plays. **Chandra Rajan** has said this emphatically. To quote: It is possible that the author of the *Natyashastra* sat down to compose his treatise with **Kalidasa**'s plays before him. That a writer of **Kalidasa**'s genius and accomplishment would write according to the book is not very likely; it seems more plausible that a critic and theorist would draw upon the work of a great writer to formulate his theories.

(**Rajan**, 29)

Nonetheless, **Kalidasa** successfully evokes the various *rasas* in his plays that add value to a scene or character. This aspect would be discussed in some detail later. In the next section we shall take a quick look at **Kalidasa**'s other works.

2.4 KALIDASA AND HIS WORKS

Kalidasa was a dramatist, an epic writer and a poet. The plots of his plays are based on the known adventures of Kings, even as legends and folk tales inspired his poetic works. **Kalidasa** gave depth to his works by making his characters multi-dimensional and expanding their scope with imaginative flights.

In his writing, characters appear layered, and their actions are governed by well-conceived notions of beauty. Importantly, **Kalidasa** is a secular voice in a largely conservative culture. His secular sense comes from his emphasis on the rational approach to life that consciously integrated pleasure with lofty ideals.

This made the writer look at events from a specific view of reality as it was

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being lived out at the time, and not through the lens of fossilised ideas borrowed **Kalidas:AnOverview**

from the past. It is **Kalidasa's** humanism that makes his works secular. His works are largely relatable. Even as **Kalidasa** wrote in the ancient period we identify with the pains and joys of his characters as well as situations because the writer stirs our basic emotions and feelings. This connects us to the world of **Kalidasa**. As a playwright, he gives voice to his characters that remained insignificant in common life but gain significance in his hands.

Seven of **Kalidasa's** works have survived the test of time. Among these we have three long lyrical poems, three plays, and an incomplete epic. The poems believed to have been written by **Kalidasa** include: Ritusamharam (Gathering of the Seasons); Kumarasambhavam (The Birth of Kumara); and Meghadutam (The Cloud Messenger). **Kalidasa** is best known for the long lyrical poem Meghadutam. Among the plays, we have Malavikagnimitram (Malavika and Agnimitra), his first play;

Vikramorvasiyam (Urvashi won by Valour); Abhijnana Shakuntala (The recognition of Shakuntala), the third in the order. Finally, **Kalidasa** wrote an epic he could not complete, titled Raghuvamsam (Raghu's Dynasty).

Ritusamharam being **Kalidasa's** early work appears to be art in the making.

In it, the poet brings to life each season and its impact on the landscape. He captures the beautiful imagery in a stylised form while attempting to make it appear natural in the poem. Such experiments with the lyric form refined the literary art of **Kalidasa** further. His skills as a creative writer and particularly a poet were perfected by the time he wrote his last poem Meghadutam which is a duta-kavyam or messenger-poem. Here, **Kalidasa** charts out the agony of a yaksha who has been separated from his beloved due to a curse (he being cursed by his lord Kubera for neglecting his duties). The Yaksha persuades the cloud to take his message to his wife. Hence, the poem's title "The Cloud Messenger". Duty and human will/desire always clash with one another in **Kalidasa**. In fact, in his play Vikramorvasiyam, **Kalidasa** projects a double curse directed at Urvashi for the neglect of work/duty, because she is caught up in deep passionate thoughts about the king. The curse element in **Kalidasa** is important because it is a form of punishment given to characters that become

'disoriented' towards duty and follow their passions—just as the Yaksha in Meghadootam or Shakuntala in Abhijnana Shakuntala or Urvashi in Vikramorvasiyam. In the next section we shall look at the difference between the two genres – the Epic and the drama and also see how the Shakuntala story in the Mahabharata differs or is the same as the play Shakuntala.

Check Your Progress 1

1.

What makes Kalidasa a secular humanist? Give reasons for your answer.

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2.5 EPIC AND DRAMA

Shakuntala's narrative is described at length in the epic Mahabharata under the section 'Sakuntalopakhyana' from the Adi Parva or the "Book of the Beginning". It is recounted as one among the many ancestral legends of the Puru lineage by Vaisampayana to Janamejaya on the occasion of a sacrificial ritual.

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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

2.5.1

The Original Story of Shakuntala from the Epic

Shakuntala

Mahabharata

This narrative is focused on discovering who the Bharatas were. The answer is - they were descendants of Bharata, born of Shakuntala and Duhsanta (a Paurava king). The focus of the narrative is on Duhsanta and the significance of Shakuntala is limited to her son who would be the prospective heir to Duhsanta's throne. In the epic, Duhsanta is projected as the "triumphant king"

who is the "equal of Indra, slayer of foes, warder-off of enemy elephants, they thought of him as the Thunderbolt-Wielder himself" (Buitenen 57).

The story in the epic goes as follows. King Duhsanta while pursuing a deer enters "the depths of forest" and chances upon a holy hermitage that appears to him as "Indira's paradise". Here "no tree lacked bloom or fruit" and "no tree was thorny". The wilderness was an idyllic picture. Duhsanta reaches the sanctum of the ascetic Kanva Kasyapa to pay his respects. But there instead of Kanva he finds his adopted daughter Shakuntala.

Duhsanta is immediately smitten by the beauty of the maiden. He

... saw that she had beautiful hips, a lustrous appearance, and a charming smile. She was radiant with beauty, with the sheen of austerities and the calm of self-restraint.

(161)

He then asks her about her parentage. Shakuntala narrates the story of her birth as she heard it from Kanva once upon a time. She is the daughter of an apsara, Menaka and the austere ascetic Vishwamitra. On birth, Menaka abandons her and goes back to the realm of the gods, to Indra. Shakuntala according to her own narrative is then found by the saint Kanva. Having heard her tale King Duhsanta reaffirms that Shakuntala couldn't have been an ordinary maiden. He coaxes her to enter into a Gandharva marriage with him, a marriage "done in secret" with rituals "between a loving man and a loving woman". Shakuntala agrees on one condition—she asks the King to promise that the son that may be "born from me shall be Young King to succeed you, great King, declare this to me as the truth! If it is to be thus, Duhsanta, you may lie with me". He agrees and the two consummate their marriage.

Thereafter, the king returns to court. Shakuntala in the following year gives birth to a son at saint Kanva's hermitage. The child "radiant like a blazing fire"

grows up in the hermitage for six years—he "would fetter lions and tigers" to the trees around the hermitage. Watching his "superhuman exploits" Kanva decides to send him to the King's palace with Shakuntala. At the King's palace, Duhsanta refuses to acknowledge Shakuntala, calling her an "evil ascetic".

Shakuntala "stunned with grief" pleads her case emphasising the importance of a son for the king – she says "a son is a putra because he saves his father from the hell named Put" and calls herself the dutiful wife, stating that

"she is a wife who is handy in the house, she is a wife who bears children, she is a wife whose life is her husband" (167). Duhsanta humiliates Shakuntala in the following way:

I do not know that this is my son you have born, Shakuntala. Women are liars—who will trust your word? Menaka, your mother, was a merciless slut who cast you off like a faded garland on a peak of the Himalayas! Viswamitra, your merciless father, who born a baron, reached for brahminhood, was a lecher!



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*Shakuntala hears out Duhsanta, points out his forgetfulness and describes her **Kalidas:AnOverview***

higher lineage— “My birth is higher than yours Duhsanta! You walk on earth, great king, but I fly the skies”. She finally, comes back to the issue of her son and warns Duhsanta – “ The ancestors call a son the foundation of family, and lineage, the highest of all merits of Law—therefore one should never abandon a son” (168). Having said all this, Shakuntala departs and a celestial voice warns Duhsanta of his wrong deed. At this, Duhsanta changes his stance suggesting – “ I myself knew very well he was my son. But if I had taken him as my son on her word alone, suspicion would have been rife among the people and he would never have been cleared of it.” (169) Therefore, Duhsanta suggests, that he has to play the fraudulent game of rebuking her. With this, Duhsanta accepts his son and Shakuntala and brings them both to the court declaring the latter the young King.

Check Your Progress 2

1.

How was the story of Shakuntala narrated in the Mahabharata? Who was the central figure in that narrative?

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2.5.2 The Question of Form

*Is there a difference between the story narrated in the Mahabharata and its representation in **Kalidasa**'s play? **Kalidasa** takes up the story from the Mahabharata, works on it, fleshes it out and makes it into a play. The basic difference is that the form of the legend is different. In the Mahabharata, the story is narrated in an epic fashion, and in the play the plot is laid out for use on the stage. As we read the play, we recognise, that there is a basic difference in 'telling' and 'showing' in the two forms respectively.*

Does something change if the form of the plot is a narrative or a drama? When the story is narrated in an epic and later acted out as a play, does it undergo modification? What exactly alters with the change of the form/ genre? Let us bear in mind that when the form/ genre of the plot changes, the story assumes a new pattern. In the case of drama, dialogues become central and for that reason a character's inner dynamics comes to the fore. The epic may have dialogues, too, but it is governed by the requirements of the narrative. As far as the play is concerned, characters take over and speak that which follows their motivation. Later, in view of different motivations clashing with one another, the dramatic action moves following the dictates of the changing scenario. The play, thus, invites the reader / viewer to imaginatively participate in the action on stage. In the play, there is no direct judgment to tell the audience what is to be followed and why. This is at variance with what happens in an epic, where the narrative has the reins on the evolving action, at each stage interpreting the goings on. The play works as a stimulus for intellectual debate that is played out on the stage as well as in the minds of the audience. Also, characters in a play are allowed more space to live out the moment which is not possible in the epic. Further, the play is a continuum, unlike the epic where episodes have a character of their own. These are interpreted by the audience depending on their individual merit at the specific moment.



Kalidasa: Abhijnana

While changing the form/ genre, **Kalidasa** retells the story differently with this,

Shakuntala

the emphases of his work changes. As he lays out the story from the Mahabharata for representation on stage, he assigns to it new parameters involving scenes, small acts of individual characters, and the interplay of situations in the format of showing and representing. What does one mean by the playwright's emphases here? It is those aspects in a text that receive special focus at the cost of those that are pushed into the background. The playwright consciously picks up a point for expansion and gives more space to it than others. Emphases are based on the playwright's sympathies and preferences.

Think of the title of the work, Abhijnana Shakuntalam i.e. "The Recognition of Shakuntala". **Kalidasa** makes it clear where his sympathies lie and who the protagonist of the play will be. That a woman will be the hero of the story reveals the position of the playwright. In the Mahabharata, the section of

"Shakuntala" comes under the head of "The Origins". Even as the title of the section is "Shakuntala" in the Mahabharata, it is Shakuntala as the beautiful maiden and later Bharata's mother that gets foregrounded. As a consequence, the king is at the centre, he is the active agent in the episode.

That is not the case with **Kalidasa's** Shakuntala.

In **Kalidasa's** Abhijnana Shakuntalam, Shakuntala is the central character

whose feelings and thoughts are elaborated in great detail by the playwright.

The play revolves around her travails and fights. For now, suffice it to say that the story of Shakuntala undergoes a sea of change in the hands of **Kalidasa**—

both because the emphases of the text shifts and because the form of representation changes. Let us now take a look at the dramatic art more specifically. We should also look at ancient Indian aesthetics as aesthetics dictate to aspects of drama.

Check Your Progress 3

1.

Write a comparative note on the epic and the drama keeping in mind their specific features.

2.6 ANCIENT INDIAN AESTHETICS

Dramatic art in ancient India held an appeal as no other art form did. Recitations of folk tales and epics gradually came to include enactments. The form of drama in Sanskrit literature particularly included aspects of dance, music and acting.

It was performative in an inclusive sense as it freely used gestures, mimes and dance postures. Dance and drama during the period were not viewed as distinct forms.

2.6.1 Dramatic Art

Drama was a mix of many elements. It was an art form that included lyrical and narrative modes; verse and prose; speech, song and acting; masks, costume and ornaments. Together these provided a distinct stylisation to drama in the ancient period.

*At the point of time when **Kalidasa** wrote his plays, the dramatic form had emerged on the literary horizon. The process has been observed as follows:*

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Many of the elements of drama were already in place at a very early

time, perhaps by the middle of the first millennium BC, at the time of **Panini**, the great grammarian who was also a poet. With various traditions converging around this time: the literary tradition of the Vedas and epics, the popular and folk play traditions centering perhaps around vegetation rites and festivals such as sowing and harvesting, the ritual drama and the dance with its story-line, it was inevitable that drama as we understand it should have been evolving into its final form.

(Rajan 33)

It is suggested that in the ancient period the popular and folk traditions were extensively deployed in performances during festivals. These popular forms close to the life of everyday people were used even in court dramas that eventually took shape over the centuries to follow. Court drama took elements from the four Vedas so that it became a source of high learning as well. **Amartya Sen**'s comment on the Vedas offers a useful insight into the nature of writing at the time. For **Sen**,

The Vedas may be full of hymns and religious invocations, but they also tell stories, speculate about the world and—true to the argumentative propensity already in view—ask difficult questions. A basic doubt concerns the very creation of the world: did someone make it, was it a spontaneous emergence, and is there a God who knows what really happened?

(132)

To be sure, the way we visualise the ancient past of India is different from the way the ancients looked at themselves. Far from being rigid, the Vedas appear to be open-ended and preserves the exploratory spirit. Speaking specifically about the Rigveda, **Sen** has added: The Rigveda goes on to express radical doubts on these issues: 'who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced?

Whence is this creation? ...perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know'. These doubts from the second millennium BCE would recur again and again in India's long argumentative history, along with a great many other questions about epistemology and ethics.

(132)

That the Rigveda, the first Veda, expresses "radical doubts" about the basic questions of life makes it clear that India's ancient past was more heterogeneous and secular. The aesthetic of the period reflects that spirit,

too. This gets projected in the theory of drama presented as a treatise by **Bharata** in the *Natyashastra*. This obviously demands a brief look at the *Natyashastra* next **2.6.2 Bharata's Natyashastra**

Natyashastra (the poetics of drama) is a treatise on the dramatic art that attempts to outline the aim, purpose and role of drama in ancient India. The treatise includes specific features and elements considered integral to Sanskrit drama. 'Natyā' carries the root word 'nat' which means to act or emote. It may be applied to both drama and dance, as 'natya' is also the word for dancing or dramatic representation and 'natak' denotes a play. *Natyashastra* is the oldest text on the theory of drama that has survived for centuries. **Bharata** termed it the fifth Veda. He has claimed:

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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

I shall make a fifth Veda on the Natya with the Semi-historical Tales

Shakuntala

(itihasa) which will conduce to duty (dharma), wealth (artha) as well as fame, will contain good counsel and collection [of other material for human well-being], will give guidance to people of the future as well in all their actions, will be enriched by the teaching of all scriptures (sastra) and will give a review of all arts and crafts (silpa).

(qtd, in Nagpal 55)

Note that it is meant to be a Veda i.e. crystallised knowledge of supreme importance on the aspect of natya that is drama. Drama occupied an important position in the ancient period. It was an essential source of learning. For this reason, **Bharata** claimed that drama based on his

treatise “will conduce”...

people “to duty” bring them on the path of dharma and “provide guidance to people of the future”. The suggestion here is that **Bharata** pictures the afterlife of his text much like the Vedas were considered in his own time. He believes that *Natyashastra* too would hold similar importance. Nonetheless, the focus is on offering knowledge through the agency of drama. Thus, drama was meant to be didactic in nature even as it entertained the audience in the process. To teach and to delight became the central aim of dramatic art in the hands of critics and writers of Sanskrit literature. Interestingly, **Bharata** notes that the fifth Veda, *Natyashastra*, would be accessible to all unlike the first four Vedas that were and maybe still are denied to women and shudras. For **Bharata**, *Natyashastra* could be read by anyone. What is the significance of this? Such an exercise would make scriptures and literature human-centred and approachable.

The *Natyashastra* provides ten different types of dramatic representations that are determined by factors of length of a play, theme, plot and characters. *Nataka* and *Prakarna* belong to the category of full length plays of five to ten acts that have as their subject plots taken from histories and fictional stories respectively. On the other hand, there are *bhanas* that are satirical monologues and dwell on superficial or less important themes. Between these extremes, the treatise fits in tragedies and comedies that may have one to four acts and the subject is of relative importance. These include among others, *samavakara* and *ihamrga* (that have less than five acts but deal with divine themes); *vyayog* and *anka* (one act plays based on a single day's event).

The *Natyashastra* was meant to take elements from the first four Vedas and include these under one head. It ventured to draw from the *Rigveda* the

“recitative” quality, from the *Yajurveda* “histrionic representation”, from the *Atharvaveda* “rituals and style” and from the *Samaveda* the “*rasas*”. Importantly, the *Natyashastra* is best known for expounding the theory of *rasas* which is particularly relevant for us in understanding the aesthetic sensibility of **Kalidasa**.

The peculiar sensibility of **Kalidasa** will be focused in the next section. Let us first understand the theory of *rasa*. For **Sheldon Pollock** *rasa* is that which can be “savoured”. To him:

Bharata's language often clearly suggests that his analytical focus is on *rasa* in the character. The comic, for example, ‘is seen to exist for the most part in women and characters of low status’, not in the response of the

viewer. Moreover, **Bharata's** conception of the casual process—bhavas, or emotions, are the factors that

'manifest' the rasa—implies, or at least later is taken to imply, the pre-existence of rasa in the character and hence the character's 20

analytical primacy. (49)



Bharata provides us with a list of eight rasas —the erotic (srngar); the comic **Kalidas:AnOverview**

(hasya); the furious (raudra); the pathetic (karuna); the heroic (vir); the marvelous (adbhut); the odious (bibhatsa); and the terrible (bhayanak). All these have their specific importance in the writer's scheme of things. Among these, the rasa of srngar reigns supreme. This is because srngar is the rasa of pleasure and beauty.

Check Your Progress 4

1.

What was the purpose of dramatic art in the ancient period as discussed by Bharat Muni in his Natyashastra?

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit has brought into focus aspects of ancient Indian drama. It has offered a discussion on **Kalidasa's** probable time and culture. In this discussion, an attempt has been made to provide a view of **Kalidasa's** literary background that would enable us to understand the larger context of ancient Indian aesthetics, this in turn led us to an overview of **Kalidasa's** creative oeuvre. A general view of **Bharata's** *Natyashastra* has been provided and his concepts of drama touched upon since they make the backbone of ancient Sanskrit drama. Apart from these, the question of form has been taken up and particularly the forms of epic and drama have been compared in the context of **Kalidasa**. We also gained a view of the original story that was written in the *Mahabharata* and later adapted by **Kalidasa** for his dramatic work.

2.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1.

Read Section 2.4

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Read Section 2.5.1

Check Your Progress 3

1.

Read Section 2.5.2

Check Your Progress 4

1.

Read Section 2.6, 2.6.1 & 2.6.2

2.9 GLOSSARY

Topography—the material place with its specific features/ the physical characteristics of a region.

Yaksa—is an ancient spirit that guarded nature and was worshipped as a deity of groves and water sources.



Kalidasa: Abhijnana

Shakuntala

UNIT 3

ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALA:

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Structure

3.0

Objectives

3.1

Introduction

3.2

Summary & Analysis Acts I-IV

3.2.1

Prologue

3.2.2

Act I: The Chase

3.2.3

Act II: Concealment of the Telling

3.2.4

Act III: Love's Fruition

3.2.5

Act IV: Shakuntala's Departure

3.3

Summary and Analysis Acts V- VII

3.3.1

Act V: The Repudiation of Shakuntala

3.3.2

Act VI: Separation from Shakuntala

3.3.3

Act VII: Shakuntala's Prosperity

3.4

Themes

3.4.1

The Theme of Love

3.4.2

The Theme of Concealment

3.4.3

The Hermitage and the Court

3.5

Let Us Sum Up

3.6

Hints to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will be analysing the text / play Abhijnana Shakuntala critically.

We will begin with a brief explanation on how to read the play. This will help us to understand the play and enjoy its full aesthetic appeal. This will be followed by a detailed summary of the seven Acts. In addition to this, we will also discuss the major themes and characters in the play.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

*Abhijnana Shakuntala is one of the most well-known plays by **Kalidasa**. As most of the Sanskrit dramas of his time, **Kalidasa** wrote in a mixture of both classical Sanskrit - spoken by the royals, courtly figures, upper caste figures and Prakrit, consisting of different types of vernaculars - spoken by the common people including women and children. What does this sentence say about the times? Does it strike you to find women and children clubbed together? Hold that thought.*

*The title of the play Abhijnana Shakuntala can be translated as The Recognition of Shakuntala. The play, as stated in the earlier unit, is an extension of an episode from the Mahabharata. **Kalidasa**'s prowess as an exemplary dramatist can be seen in way he has lent complexity to the characters - to Shakuntala and Duhsanta, adding innovative elements such as the curse and the ring to enhance the rasa of kama /love as well as, making Duhsanta's character more appealing to the audience. Furthermore, the ultimate union of the hero and the heroine does not occur in the royal Palace of the King but in the heavenly hermitage of Marica and Aditi, years after the birth of their son. Thus, his retelling of Shakuntala is significantly different from its original*

source.



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Kalidasa creates a heroic drama of a romantic nature, endearing it to the

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

*audience of his day and now readers beyond his time and place. The
longing* **Textual Analysis**

*and aches of first love; the trials of love thwarted; the happiness at being reunited; are emotions and feelings that everyone can identify with. However, one cannot deny how the drama is a reflection of particular socio-political and cultural ethos of his time. The very rejection of Shakuntala because of the loss of the token makes us question the position of women in his time (notwithstanding the loss of memory). As Mitrakesi asks “does a love such as this really need a token of recognition? How can that be? ” (254). Duhsanta’s unhappiness at his inability to have a son is a telling portrayal of the importance of sons in carrying the name of the family forward. Even in the depiction of the fisherman who finds the lost ring, **Kalidasa** shows the corrupt and brutal nature of the guards/ soldiers/ law enforcers who treat him unfairly and assume his guilt without any proof. Such details help us to imagine the world of Shakuntala and Duhsanta with a clarity and nuance not available in the epic.*

The play is available to us in translation, which naturally begs the question of how well can the translated text embody the rasa/essence of the drama? The translation that we are using is the Penguin Classics series titled
Kalidasa -

*The Loom of Time by **Chandra Rajan**, published in 1989. The text is a beautiful rendering of the original drama, keeping in mind its literary and aesthetic quality.*

When we read the play, we are able to imagine the cool wooded groove where Duhsanta first meets Shakuntala,

Rippling beneath a passing breeze, waters flow

in deep channels to lave the roots of trees;

*smoke drifts up from oblations to the Sacred Fire to dim the soft sheen of
tender leafbuds;*

free from fearm fawns browse lazily in meadows

beyond, where darbha-shoots are closely cropped.

(p.175)

*- feel Shakuntala's crushing agony when she leaves the Hermitage for the
royal palace,*

*Rent from my dear father's lap like a sapling of the sandlewood tree
uprooted from the side of the Malaya mountain, how can I survive in an
alien soil?*

(p. 227)

*and visualise the splendor of Indra's chariot as it travels in the sky. To
enjoy the play, we must imagine as we read and keep in mind the fact that
Sanskrit drama does not just include dialogues but also includes subtle
gestures and postures, singing, dancing, and miming to bring about a
holistic performance and enjoyment of the narrative. For the sake of
consistency, all spellings, references, and page numbers referred to follow
the said edition.*

Check Your Progress 1

1.

***What is the difference between the Shakuntala episode in the Mahabharata
and in Kalidasa's play?***

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....



Kalidasa: Abhijnana

Shakuntala

3.2

SUMMARY & ANALYSIS ACTS I - IV

In this section we shall try and summarise the play, for convenience sake we have split the play into two segments – Acts I – IV and Acts V – VII. Let us begin with the Prologue and summarise each act as we go along. Needless to say we hope everyone has read the play by now.

3.2.1 Prologue

The play opens with a benediction or a prayer to Lord Shiva.

That first creator of the Creator

That Bearer of oblations offered with Holy Rites: That one who utters the Holy Chants:

Those two that order Time:

That which extends, World – Pervading,

In which sound flows impinging on the ear:

That which is proclaimed the Universal Womb of Seeds: That which fills all forms that breathe

with the Breath of Life.

May the supreme Lord of the Universe

*who stands revealed in these eights Forms**

perceptible preserve you.

**The eight forms are in order: Water, Fire, The Priest, Sun and Moon, Space, Earth, Air*

(p. 169)

This invocation follows the Epic tradition and seeks blessing and inspiration from the divine, thereby sanctifying the play. The Sutradhar/Narrator/Director, then, addresses the Actress/wife, introducing in the progress of the dialogue the play being performed for the audience. The Narrator/Director deftly moves to presenting the Hero/ Nayank of the play- King Duhsanta- as the latter arrives on stage in full hunting regalia chasing a fleet of antelope.

3.2.2 Act I: The Chase

Act 1 takes place in the forest on the foothills of the Himalayas and moves to the hermitage of the great sage Kanva, by the river Malini. The King Duhsanta appears, followed by his Charioteer, in hot pursuit of a deer, specifically a Blackbuck, which is a sacred animal. Duhsanta is stopped in his hunt by an ascetic who reminds him of his duty

This deer is of the Hermitage, O King! He should not be killed...no...no... do not strike him down.

How fragile the life of this deer!

How cruel your sharp- pointed arrows, swift-winged!

Never should they fall on his tender frame

like tongues of flame on a heap of flowers.

Quickly withdraw your well-aimed arrow, bound

to protect the distressed, not strike the pure.

(p. 173)

Furthermore, Duhsanta has entered the sacred Hermitage, where such slaughter is sacrilegious. At the ascetics urging, Duhsanta decides to go to the Hermitage of Kanva, to pay his respect as well enjoy the hospitality

offered there. As 24

they near the Hermitage, Duhsanta takes of his royal ornaments and weapons,



as it seems unfit for such a spiritual space. On entering he sees three women

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

watering plants and one of them is Shakuntala whose extraordinary beauty
Textual Analysis

immediately captivates Duhsanta. He hides behind some trees to further observe the trio and finally reveals himself to them. The women welcome a disguised Duhsanta into their midst, where he learns that Shakuntala is the adopted daughter of the sage Kanva. She is in fact the daughter of the Apsara/celestial nymph, Menaka and the seer Visvamitra. Duhsanta's questions lead him to figuring out her Kshatriya origin, which makes Shakuntala a suitable bride for him. Before Duhsanta can learn of Shakuntala's feelings for him, they hear the news of how the arrival of Duhsanta's hunting party has frightened an elephant and that the elephant is now wreaking havoc in the forest. As the party splits, Shakuntala realises that she has fallen in love with Duhsanta, and the two depart with longing for the other in their hearts.

3.2.3 Act II: Concealment of the Telling

Act II takes place in the forest and introduces Madhavya, the Court Jester, and a close friend of Duhsanta, who complains about the physical pains he is undergoing because of following Duhsanta on his hunting expeditions.

Duhsanta is presented as suffering from lovesickness, and describes

Shakuntala to Madhavya in sensual terms. He then asks Madhavya to help him gain entry into the hermitage on some pretext or the other. Characteristic of a jester, Madhavya is quick to respond in a witty manner and tells Duhsanta that as the King, he can rightfully enter the hermitage to demand the royal tax owed to him by the ascetics. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of two ascetics who request Duhsanta to protect their sacred rites from demons bent on disturbing them. Duhsanta readily agrees as it complements his desire to visit the Hermitage without arousing any suspicion. However, his joy is cut short by the arrival of Karabhaka with a message from the Queen Mother asking for his immediate return to Hastinapur. Torn between his duty towards the ascetics and his mother, Duhsanta finally decides to go to the hermitage and sends Madhavya in his stead to Hastinapur. Duhsanta, however, is careful to mask his interest in Shakuntala and tells Madhavya that his interest in her was a just “a whim” (197).

3.2.4 Act III: Love's Fruition

This Act continues in the forest and opens with a Prelude which functions to inform the audience of events that have occurred off stage. Here the audience is told of Duhsanta's success at thwarting the demons and how Shakuntala is suffering from a 'heat stroke' making her feel hot and feverish. Shakuntala is actually shown to be suffering from lovesickness, unable to keep Duhsanta out of her thoughts, she longs for his company. Her two companions, Priyamvada and Anasuya try to soothe her. Duhsanta presently arrives at the bower where the three women are resting and on hearing Shakuntala confess her love for him, reveals himself to them. Shakuntala's companions leave the two lovers alone and in the process Duhsanta tries to woo Shakuntala.

However, their love play is interrupted by the arrival of Gautami, the Matron of the Hermitage, and the lovers separate. A despondent Duhsanta is called to fight the demons tormenting the ascetics.

3.2.5 Act IV: Shakuntala's Departure The scene is still the forest and much has happened in the meantime. The Prelude in this Act reveals that Shakuntala and Duhsanta have married according to the Gandharva rites. Duhsanta has since then left for Hastinapur. While 25



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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

Shakuntala's companions discuss Duhsanta's dedication to her, the great sage

Shakuntala

Durvasa Rishi arrives at the Hermitage. Shakuntala, distracted by the thoughts of Duhsanta, does not attend to the great sage.

Durvasa Rishi, known for his temper, immediately curses her saying:

... you shall be lost in his thoughts:

though you goad his memory hard

he shall fail to remember you,

(215)

As Durvasa Rishi storms off, Anasuya attempts to plead with the sage and manages to extract a reprieve wherein, at the presentation of a token of recognition, the curse will be lifted. The companions are reassured at this because Duhsanta had given a ring to Shakuntala as a token of his love and so believe that the curse will be broken without much harm. The Prelude ends with both the companions deciding to spare Shakuntala from the knowledge of the curse.

Worried for Shakuntala, Anasuya begins to question Duhsanta's actions and wonders how to inform Kanva of his daughter's marriage and pregnancy. The resolution arrives in the form of a spiritual voice that announces the union of Shakuntala and Duhsanta to the great sage. Kanva is overjoyed at this and decides to send Shakuntala to Duhsanta's court with a few ascetic escorts.

Shakuntala's departure from the Hermitage is poignantly described. Everyone is filled with sorrow seeing her leave even the plants and animals forsake their natural routines and grieve her absence from the holy Grove. As Shakuntala bids farewell to her home and embraces her family and friends for the last time, Kanva instructs her on her duty to the King and other's at the palace. The finality of Shakuntala's separation from the world of the Hermitage is established through Kanva's words where he says that she can only return after fulfilling her duties as wife and mother, in the final years of her of her life with her husband.

Check Your Progress 2

1.

What is the function of the Prologue at the beginning of the play?

.....

.....

.....

3.3

SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF ACTS V–VII

The next few sections will deal with the remaining portions of the Sanskrit drama *Abhijnana Shakuntala* by **Kalidasa**. As mentioned earlier, for convenience sake we have divided the play into two segments – Acts I to IV and Acts V –

VII. Let's move on with our summary and analysis without wasting time.

3.3.1 Act V: The Repudiation of Shakuntala

The Prelude takes place in Duhsanta's Royal Palace and begins with the Chamberlain praising the King's hard work in maintaining peace and prosperity in the kingdom and his exemplary behavior in all things concerned with the welfare of the state and his subjects. Shakuntala and her entourage appear at the Royal Palace and wait for an audience with Duhsanta. One of the ascetics, Sarngarava, relays Kanva's message and asks him to accept Shakuntala as his wife. Duhsanta, under the influence of the curse does not remember Shakuntala and refuses to acknowledge her as his wife. Shakuntala tries to 26

prove her claim by presenting the token of recognition but realises instead

that



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she has lost it. Duhsanta casts doubts on Shakuntala's virtuosity and honesty

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

*and tells the accompanying ascetics to take her back with them. The ascetics, **Textual Analysis***

however, refuse to take her back, saying that if she is lying then she will be a stain on Kanva's honour and therefore, cannot be allowed to go back and, if she is indeed speaking the truth then she must be with her husband, even if it means living in servitude to him. Shakuntala is thus, left stranded and alone with no one by her side and she cries for Mother Earth/ Dharti Mata to open up and swallow her whole. Note, three important issues here: a) women's position in society; b) the notion of honour; c) the similarity between this particular episode and a similar scene from another famous epic. Women were positioned in the safe keeping of their father or the husband as it is clear from the various references in the text. Secondly, if a woman were not married conventionally as is the case with Shakuntala and the husband refused to acknowledge her then she would be a stain on the honour of the father. Thirdly, Sita in the Ramayana is faced with a similar situation when a washer man/ dhobi casts aspersions on her chastity on her return from Lanka.

Finally the King's High Priest comes up with a solution to let her remain in the King's palace till she gives birth and should the child she bear be the son prophesised (King Bharata) to Duhsanta, then Shakuntala may be accepted as his lawful wife and take her rightful place by his side. No sooner do the ascetics, High Priest, and Shakuntala leave that the High Priest rushes back to Duhsanta and tells him how as Shakuntala wept, a bright light in the form of a woman from the Apsara Pool came and took

Shakuntala with her.

Duhsanta dismisses the whole affair and yet he feels a strange sensation of missing something and a “poignant ache” (243) in his heart that seems to validate Shakuntala’s claim.

3.3.2 Act VI : Separation from Shakuntala

The Prelude informs us about a fisherman who has been found with the lost royal ring (originally given to Shakuntala). The guards/ soldiers/ law enforcers accuse him of stealing the ring, but he claims to have found it in the stomach of a fish he caught. The fisherman’s innocence is proven once Duhsanta sees the ring, and rewards the man for finding it. Duhsanta then remembers Shakuntala, their marriage, and his promise to bring her to his palace. He is ashamed of his behavior and cannot figure out why his memory lapsed at that particular moment. He is distraught about how he repudiated Shakuntala and the cruel ways in which he doubted her. His sorrow at having lost his beloved is so severe that he orders the cancellation of the celebration of the Spring Festival. Duhsanta tries to recreate his first encounter with Shakuntala by painting it and conversing with the painting. Madhavya laments how the king has become so despondent that he has lost all vitality. Meanwhile, Misrakesi, a friend of Shakuntala’s mother Menaka, quietly observes Duhsanta’s behavior.

Finding his remorse genuine, she goes back to the Apsara Pool to report her findings to Shakuntala. Even as Duhsanta is wracked with remorse, he deals with matters of the state and is approached with the problem of solving the inheritance rights of a rich merchant who dies without a legal heir. The merchant’s wealth is set to be appropriated by the royal treasury but Duhsanta asks for the wealth to be given to one of the merchant’s pregnant wife, thereby ensuring that the child to be born is not left penniless.



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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

Duhsanta feels bad for his ancestors as he himself is without any issue, which

Shakuntala

will leave them without anyone to perform sacred rites and rituals. This adds to his misery and he faints. On waking Duhsanta learns that some invisible entity is threatening Madhavya. As he rushes to save his friend, it is revealed that the entity is Matali, Lord Indra's charioteer, who on seeing a dejected Duhsanta, devises this plan to rouse him into action. Matali requests Duhsanta to fight on the behalf of the gods against demons bent on destroying them.

Duhsanta readily agrees and they leave on Indra's chariot.

3.3.3 Act VII - Shakuntala's Prosperity This Act occurs in the realm of the celestial beings and then moves to the Hermitage of Marica/ Prajapati and Aditi (Indra's father and mother). After defeating the demons, Duhsanta and Matali are on their way back to earth when Duhsanta sees the holy Hermitage of sage Marica and expresses his desire to seek his blessings. At the Hermitage, Matali requests an audience with Marica and in the ensuing wait Duhsanta comes across a young boy playing with a lion's cub and playfully tormenting his caretakers. He notices the mark prophesised that was meant to be on his son, on the young boy and begins to yearn for a child. In the course of the conversation with the caretakers, Duhsanta realises that the boy might indeed be his son and after picking up the boy's magical amulet that only his parents or Marica could touch, it cements Duhsanta's belief of being the father. Shakuntala appears at the news of a stranger's arrival and at first is unable to recognise Duhsanta. In a touch of irony, it is Duhsanta now who asks to be recognised as the boy's father.

Duhsanta explains his loss of memory and how he regained it at the sight of the ring and a happy Shakuntala accepts his explanation. The reunited family goes to Marica to seek his blessings where Marica reveals the truth about Durvasa Rishi's curse. Duhsanta is relieved at this revelation and is absolved of his cruel behavior. Kanva is also informed of the events and the family leaves for earth from the celestial realm. The play ends here. In the next sections we will take a look at the critical themes that the play deals with.

3.4 THEMES

A theme is the central topic of a text. However, since no work of literature can concentrate on just one theme without referencing others, a text will usually have more than one, with some being more essential for the text than others.

Abhijnana Shakuntala deals with many themes, such as love, memory, concealment, duty Vs desire, courtly world Vs the hermitage etc. Let us begin with the theme of Love.

3.4.1 The Theme of Love

Abhijnana Shakuntala as stated in the introduction is a heroic drama of a romantic nature. The rasa invoked here is *sringara* or love and according to the Sanskrit dramatic order, love poetry consists of *sambhoga*, love in union and *vipralambha*, love in separation. In the play, **Kalidasa** first creates a temporary union of the protagonists, King Duhsanta, the hero or *nayaka* and Shakuntala, the heroine or *nayaki*, as the play narrativises the burgeoning and consummation of their love (ACT I, II, III) . It is then followed by separation 28

caused by the loss of memory and the token ring due to the curse (ACT IV,



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V, & VI). The play ends with the re-union of not only Shakuntala and Duhsanta

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

but also of their son Bharata (ACT VI).

Textual Analysis

We notice how these different stages of love occur in different places in the play. The initial courting and marriage takes place in the forest of the Hermitage, where the King had come to hunt. It's a world that is an intrinsic part of Shakuntala's character; even the plants and animals are her kin. Duhsanta has thus entered her world. The interruption of this love happens when Duhsanta leave this world to go back to the Royal Palace, where his duties as a king await. When Shakuntala goes to claim her right to be by his side at his Court, the device of the curse delays that union and both the ascetic companions and Duhsanta desert her. Their final union happens around six years later in the celestial realm on a heavenly mountain in the Hermitage of Marica and Aditi.

In portraying the development of their love in such a way **Kalidasa** highlights the differences between the world of the Hermitage and the world of the Royal Court. Paradoxically, it is in the world of the Hermitage, a place for austerities and meditation that Shakuntala and Duhsanta find love and it is the Royal Court, a place ideal for the intrigues of love that their separation occurs.

Shakuntala born and bred in the innocent and pure world of nature puts her faith in words rather than objects thus, consenting to a Gandharva marriage.

This form of marriage does not require the consent of the parents/elders and is primarily foregrounded on the desires of the lovers. However, this love cannot disrupt the established caste hierarchy and therefore, we see how Duhsanta pursues Shakuntala once he ascertains her Kshatriya varna. Duhsanta represents the world outside the secluded and protected Hermitage, which is filled with deceit and cunning. In this world, Shakuntala's word is not sufficient but needs tangible proof to be validated, in the form of the ring, in front of everyone in the Royal Court. The contrasting nature of their worlds necessitates that their union occurs in a different world altogether, moreover specifically after Duhsanta becomes a more considerate and compassionate man.

Kalidasa seems to bring in an element of sadness in the prologue and some might even say unnecessary delaying of their union. **Kalidasa** shows us the

intoxicating nature of passion and love and how it might lead to a neglect of one's duty/ dharma. For Shakuntala that results in the curse which leads to her repudiation. This curse can only be broken on the presentation of a token of recognition, which is the royal signet ring.

Though the curse complicates our understanding of love, we nonetheless see how Shakuntala is unwavering in her love for Duhsanta, which ascribes her as the ideal heroine. The ring too complicates our understanding of love by making us question the veracity of love itself, if such love needs inanimate objects to validate it.

Kalidasa's depiction of love is thus nuanced and complicated and does not shy away from making his audience ask uncomfortable questions regarding it.

3.4.2 The Theme of Concealment

The theme of concealment becomes evident in Act 1 itself when Duhsanta takes off his royal garments and weapons on entering the Hermitage of Kanva. Even though he undertakes this action as a sign of respect for the sacred space, it allows him to take off the mask of a king and conceal his real identity. He introduces himself to Shakuntala as a court official out inspecting the penance grooves. This deception makes space for a much more relaxed interaction 29



Kalidasa: Abhijnana

between Duhsanta and Shakuntala and her companions, without the strict rules

Shakuntala

of engagement mandated for royals. Literally throwing off the mantle of his

kingship, Duhsanta presents himself as a man first and Shakuntala is attracted to this noble court official at first. When Duhsanta comes again to woo her, he can no longer hide his true identity as he is performing his kingly duty of protecting the Hermitage from demons.

The second act of concealment occurs in Act II when Duhsanta is urgently called by his mother to the Royal Palace. He is torn between his duty towards his mother and his kingdom, and his desire to see Shakuntala again. The dilemma is solved when the ascetics' request his help. As he sends Madhavya in his stead to the capital city, he tells Madhavya that he is staying back to do his duty towards these ascetics and not out of his desire for Shakuntala. He further tells his friend to consider all he said about Shakuntala as a joke. Duhsanta therefore, conceals his true feelings for Shakuntala as well as his reason for staying back at the Hermitage. This concealment creates a sense of foreboding in the play as it allows their marriage to be a secret from everyone outside the Hermitage and therefore, there are no witnesses who can support Shakuntala when she comes to the Royal Court.

The next concealment takes place in Act III when a lovesick Shakuntala writes a love letter to Duhsanta. The problem, however, is its delivery since Duhsanta is busy protecting the ascetics in their ritual. It is Priyamvada who devises a plan to disguise the letter with other offerings for the ritual, thus allowing her to give it to Duhsanta. Duhsanta's timely appearance saves them from actualising the plan. This event again points to the incongruity of love's actualisation in the hermitage, where such actions don't sit well with a holy space established on abstinence and austerity.

In the same act we see one of the most important scenes of concealment.

Shakuntala is so disheartened and distracted by the thoughts of Duhsanta that she unknowingly angers the sage Durvasa Rishi, who then curses her. She also fails to register the curse and is oblivious of it. It is her companions who hear the curse and on receiving the reprieve from the sage decide not to inform Shakuntala about the curse. Thus, it is their concealment of the truth of the curse that leads her to arrive at Duhsanta's court unaware of the reason why he no longer remembers her. Had she been warned, perhaps Kanva would have gone with his daughter to the court to help her or Shakuntala herself would have been more careful with the ring and not lost it in the river. With the ring as a token that would break the curse, Duhsanta and Shakuntala's union would have occurred much earlier and without so much pain on both sides.

The final concealment occurs in Act VI, where Mitrakesi hides herself to observe the repenting king. She observes how deeply Duhsanta regrets not

juts his rejection of Shakuntala but also the loss of the son who could have continued the Puru clan. Even as Misrakesi feels sad for both the suffering lovers, she does not intervene because the gods have a plan for Duhsanta and have devised their reunion in accordance to Indra's wishes. Here we see how the events of the story are not completely in the hands of the two protagonists. The reunion only occurs according to the plans of the gods. Even the curse and the subsequent loss of memory cannot be controlled by either of the two, as both are unaware of it. This makes the audience aware of the ambiguous and complex nature 30

of Fate.



3.4.3 The Hermitage and the Court

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

Textual Analysis

The Hermitage and the Court are two diametrically opposed spaces in the play.

The Hermitage is a secluded space devoted to sacred pursuits by the ascetics.

They choose to live away from society and its problems. The people there live a simple life and are closer to their natural surroundings, living in harmony with nature as they are dependent on it for their survival. Furthermore, they are under the protection of the king and call upon him for assistance during their rituals. The sacred grooves of the Hermitage are safe spaces, where even the king must not hunt animals. Shakuntala, Priyamvada, Anasuya, Kanva, Gautami etc all belong to this world.

The Court is the worldly world, a society with strict rules and regulations,

functioning under social codes that dictate the code of court etiquette to people.

Corruption and abuse of power is a part of this world as seen in the fisherman episode. The Palace itself is filled with intrigues and suspicions among Duhsanta's wives. Duhsanta himself is beset with kingly duties. Duhsanta, Madhavya, Vasumati, Hamsavati, and the High Priest belong to this world.

The king falls in love at the Hermitage and he not only extends his stay there but also neglects his duty. The Gandharva marriage between Shakuntala and Duhsanta, a marriage contracted on word alone with no witnesses or material proof can be sustained in the hermitage because it's a world that exists outside of the strict moral codes of society. Taken out of this context, such marriages are suspect and we see that in the epic where Duhsanta refuses to acknowledge Shakuntala out of fear of what his subjects might think of him. In the play the loss of memory dilutes the effect of the rejection but Duhsanta does demand proof of their marriage and the paternity of the child in accordance to the codes of the courtly world.

Wealth is another factor that marks the difference between the two worlds.

The women in the hermitage wear clothes made of bark and adorn themselves with flowers but when Shakuntala leaves for the Court, Kanva procures precious jewels from the trees to beautify his daughter in accordance with the outside world.

Throughout the play, we see how the King is forced to choose between the two worlds and must sacrifice or neglect one for the other. Similarly Shakuntala too must sever her contact with the hermitage if she is to be accepted into the courtly world. Her return can only be realised once she reaches the third stage of her life, i.e, vanaprastha, where both she and the king will give up and retire from the worldly word. Therefore, we see how characters in the play cannot inhabit both the world simultaneously and how one must carefully navigate the two worlds because they function on different principles and in different levels.

Check Your Progress 3

1.

Discuss the theme of love and marriage.

.....

.....



Kalidasa: Abhijnana

Shakuntala

3.5 LET US SUM UP

*In this Unit we have focused on the text and introduced the play within the context of Sanskrit drama. This has been followed by a detailed and comprehensive summary and examination of all the seven acts. The next section gives us a critical understanding of the major themes, which will allow us to understand the play and the purpose to which **Kalidasa** has used them. The Unit has attempted to give a concise and succinct understanding of the play to help us grapple with Sanskrit drama in translation for the first time.*

3.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

Read Section 3.1

Check Your Progress 2

Read Section 3.2.1

Check Your Progress 3

Read Section 3.4.1



UNIT 4 ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALAM:

CHARACTER ANALYSIS AND

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Structure

4.0

Objectives

4.1

Introduction

4.2

Character Analysis

4.2.1

Sutradhar

4.2.2

Shakuntala

4.2.3

Duhsanta

4.2.4

Madhavya

4.3

Critical Perspectives

4.3.1

Gender

4.3.2

Caste

4.3.3

Kingship

4.4

Let Us Sum Up

4.5

Questions

Suggested Readings and References

4.0

OBJECTIVES

This Unit is aimed at giving a deeper understanding of the play by analysing the characters and providing critical perspectives on the play. The first section examines important characters and their function in the play. The second section provides key criticisms on the play that include and are not limited to gender, caste, and kingship. Finally we will end with a few questions, which will help us to encapsulate what we have studied so far.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we'll look at what Sanskrit drama denotes and how characters have certain functions and roles to play. Sanskrit drama delineates the characters and their roles in combination with the use of various rasas. Let's take a deeper look at character analysis in the sections that follow.

4.2 CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sanskrit drama has many stock characters and the audience who were familiar with its structure could easily figure out the function of these characters.

Abhijnana Shakuntala contains the staples of Sanskrit drama with the nayanka/hero and his entourage, nayaki/heroine and her companions, Vidusaka (jester) and court officials etc. The play is a beautiful mixture of the rasa of love (srngara) and heroism (vira) and we can see how they play out in the actions and dialogues of the characters.

4.2.1 Sutradhar

As the name suggests, the Sutradhar is someone who holds the thread of the story. He is the one who introduces the play to the audience and in essence can be considered the narrator or if we stretch the analogy a bit even the director



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Kalidasa: Abhijnana

of the play and Chandra Rajan has translated the Sutradhar as Director. His

Shakuntala

role is usually restricted to introductions- of characters and acts. He guides the audience towards the proper enjoyment of the play as well as guides the play to its proper and logical ending. His role begins as soon as the Benediction ends.

Director: Lady! If the preparations in the dressing room are completed, would you be pleased to attend us?...

Director: Lady, we have here before us, an august audience that is highly educated and most discerning. This evening we wait upon it with a new play composed by Kalidasa, entitled The Recognition of Sakuntala. Will you see to it that all the actors do their very best?

(p. 169)

At one point the Sutradhar/ Narrator/ Director is so carried away by the actress's song that he forgets what they had intended to do as stated above: Director: Beautifully sung, dear lady; aha – just look around you; the audience is still, as if drawn in a picture – spellbound, caught in the web of beauty woven by your singing. Now then, what play shall we put on to honour and entertain them further?

Actress: Why, Sir, what you mentioned right at the beginning – the new play entitled The Recognition of Shakuntalâ.

Director: You do well to remind me, dear lady. Indeed, my memory failed me for an instant; because,

*I was carried far, far away, lured
By your impassioned song, compelling,
(looks towards the wings)
even as the King, Duhsanta here,
was, by the fleet fleeing antelope.
(pp. 170-71)*

4.2.2 Shakuntala

Shakuntala, the heroine or nayaki of the play, was born of the apsara Menaka and the sage Visvamitra and abandoned at birth. Kanva finds her in the forest, protected by birds and adopts her as his daughter. Being part human and part apsara, she inherits her mother's otherworldly beauty and grace, which is what, attracts Duhsanta in the first place. Shakuntala is portrayed as an exceptionally beautiful young woman who is loved by everyone in the hermitage, including the animals, trees, and plant life.

Dear Anasuya, it is not merely a matter of Father's injunction; I love them like a sister.

(p. 176)

She is first shown to us watering the plants and treating them like her kin.

Similarly, when she leaves the hermitage, the animals and trees show their sorrow as well.

Anasuya: Shakuntala dearest, have you noticed that there is not one sentient being in the Hermitage that is not sorrowful now at the thought of losing you. See:

The cakravaka answers not the call of his love

hidden behind lotus - leaves:

with lotus – fibre dangling from his beak,

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he gazes only at you.

(p. 225-26)



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Kalidasa describes *Shakuntala* in traditional feminine terms of beauty as being

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

slender waisted, smooth skin, dark hair etc. but he adds erotic terms too to
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her description through images drawn from the natural world.

Duhsanta: ...With rounded breasts concealed by cloth of bark fastened at the shoulder in a fine knot,

her youthful form enfolded like a flower

in its pale leafy sheath unfolds not its glory.

(p. 177)

Especially through Duhsanta's words we are given a sensual physical picture of the heroine. She is equated to lovely flowers, blooming with magical youth, with doe like eyes that radiate beauty, with sensuous lips, rounded breasts etc.

Though inlaid in duck weed the lotus glows;

a dusky spot enhances the moon's radiance;

this lissome girl is lovelier far dressed in bark!

... Her lower lip has the rich sheen of young shoots, her arms the very grace of tender twinning stems; her limbs enchanting as a lovely flower

glow with the radiance of magical youth.

(p. 177)

In **Kalidasa's** play, Shakuntala is therefore a young girl, yet to experience the vicissitudes of the worldly world.

The Shakuntala of the epic is slightly different from the one in the play. In the epic, Shakuntala arrives with her son at the court. When rejected, she fights for herself and her son, quoting the Law to counter Duhsanta's lies and insults. She argues her case in front of Duhsanta and prepares to leave after asserting that her son will reign sovereign. However, a heavenly voice affirms Shakuntala's words and the King accepts her. The play therefore departs firstly in showing Shakuntala as arriving before the birth of the son. At the face of Duhsanta's insults, Shakuntala does indeed, like her epic counterpart, assert her truthfulness but there is no heavenly voice to validate her words and both Duhsanta and her ascetic companions reject her. The rejection is crucial in elevating Shakuntala's status as a pious woman because even after being humiliated in front of everyone, she remains faithful to her husband and suffers with quite dignity rather than fighting further for her rights.

Shakuntala, in accordance to the character of nayaki, is therefore steadfast in her love for Duhsanta. Her loyalty to her husband is what ennoble Shakuntala as an exemplary woman, the ideal pativrata stri. Thus the play offers us a Shakuntala who will be celebrated as a virtuous woman, being both a good wife and mother.

4.2.3 Duhsanta

The Nayank or the Hero is the main protagonist of the play. Heroes in Sanskrit drama belonged to the upper castes such as Brahmins or Kshatriyas. Since these figures embodied the vira rasa, they had to be handsome without any disfigurements, be intelligent, daring, and filled with courage and fortitude, making such men worthy of the heroic mantle. Duhsanta, the King of the Puru clan in the city of Hastinapur, is an ideal hero, loved and venerated by everyone in the kingdom, even by the ascetics in the secluded Hermitage. As a king, Duhsanta is the upholder of Law, and it is his sacred duty to maintain order in his kingdom and protect his subjects. The hermits who come to request Duhsanta to protect the ritual in Act II compare him to a Royal Sage, who has the qualities of a king as well as a holy sage.



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How admirable! His person radiates such majesty; yet one feels at

Shakuntala

ease. But that is not surprising in a king who is almost a sage.

(p. 194)

What wonder then that this heroic King

with arms strong as massive iron beams

that bar the city's great gates should hold

single sway over the all supporting Earth

bounded by the dark – blue oceans?

(p. 195)

Thus, Duhsanta is presented to us as an extremely likeable character that can do no wrong. Therefore, we are not surprised when Shakuntala begins to have feeling for the disguised king after their very first meeting.

However, when we further analyse his actions we realise that he is a product of a patriarchal Brahminical order and follows the rules prescribed therein at the cost of hurting others such as the animals he hunts or his other wives whom he ignores.

The play opens with the King chasing a beautiful blackbuck, wreaking havoc in the scared forest so much so that a scared elephant runs amok in the forest causing more destruction. Duhsanta only stops when the ascetics request him to. In the pursuit of the deer, Duhsanta forgets his duty to

protect the weak and creates fear instead. The metaphor of the hunt can be applied to his pursuit of Shakuntala as well when he hides behind a tree to observe her much like how a hunter would observe its prey. His initial appreciation of Shakuntala is purely physical. He is enchanted by her beauty and demure mannerisms, which are so different from the women in the court. Even Madhavya comments and ridicules Duhsanta's sudden desire for the "taste of the sour tamarind" in contrast to the sweet delicacies available at the court. Nonetheless, Duhsanta first confirms Shakuntala's caste before beginning wooing her. As such we can see how the king is acutely aware of caste positions and doesn't dare to upset them even when it comes to love.

Duhsanta's Ghandharva marriage is another example of the king neglecting his duty and forgetting his heroic conduct.

Duhsanta: Many are the daughters of sages,
married by the Gandharva rite, we hear;
and once married, felicitated
with joyful acceptance by their fathers.

(p. 209)

Even though this type of marriage is allowed it is nevertheless a marriage whose legitimacy can be challenged and it is later on in the play. Furthermore, Duhsanta is in such a hurry to marry and consummate the marriage with Shakuntala that he does not wait for Kanva to return and also neglects to inform Kanva or even Gautami about it. This as we see is crucial in leaving Shakuntala without any material witnesses to prove her marriage to him.

Duhsanta: Are you saying that this lady is already married to me?

... O, hermits, rich in holiness, try as I might, I cannot recall to my mind accepting the hand of this lady in marriage at any time. Seeing that she is plainly pregnant, how can I receive her when I have doubts about being the husband?

(p. 237)

Duhsanta's repudiation of Shakuntala provides us with yet another glimpse into the man. Since the curse has made him forget Shakuntala, he refuses

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acknowledge her and the unborn child, calling her a cuckoo for trying to pass

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

of another man's child as his. He further insults her by insinuating that all women **Character Analysis and**

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are sly and cunning.

Ascetic matron, listen:

intuitive cunning is seen even in females

of lower creatures: what then of those

endowed with reason and understanding:

the cuckoo, as we know, has her young reared

by other birds before they take to the air.

(p. 239)

We can excuse Duhsanta's memory loss but we cannot excuse his harsh and sexist rejection.

Perish the sinful thought,

Why are you out to sully your family's honour,

and to make me fall; you are like a river

that crumbles its banks to muddy its crystal stream, and uproots the tree growing by its edge.

(p.238)

Even as Duhsanta regrets his actions later when his memory is restored, such remorse seems lacking in sincerity if this is how Duhsanta behaves with women in general. **Kalisada** has portrayed a king whose actions is not above criticisms and thus provides us with a nuanced depiction of a hero that allows for a reconsideration of the hero figure.

4.2.4 Madhavya

The jester is a stock figure in Sanskrit drama and is portrayed here by Madhavya. He is Duhsanta's constant companion and friend and is the only other character from the world of Hastinapur who knows about Shakuntala.

Madhavya is depicted as a frail, hunchback with a staff, weak because of the physical strains of following the king in his hunts. He is thus a perfect foil to the handsome king. Madhavya's role as the jester is not limited to providing witty humour that highlights the flaws of the people around him. He is also Duhsanta's friend and confidant. He provides a helpful ear to the king, who unburdens himself on Madhavya, giving advice as well as providing solutions.

Their friendship is so close that Duhsanta sends Madhavya in his stead for the completion of his mother's ritual. It is to Madhavya that Duhsanta reveals his true self and feelings.

O, this cruel play of Fate: I am reduced to a state of such misery; and why – because I am the friend and constant companion of the King – he is obsessed with the chase.

... Then, what happened – as my ill - luck would have it, he chanced upon a beautiful hermit-girl – Shakuntala is the name. From that moment, Sirs, the very idea of returning to the Capital finds no place in his thoughts.

(p. 187)

Despite being the King's friend, Madhavya does not shy away from poking fun at the lovesick king, even interrogating Duhsanta's desire for Shakuntala or satirically reminding him of his duties. Thus, Madhavya provides comic relief in the play that would otherwise become too serious. His words show his witty humour, which does not disparage anyone. Perhaps this is why Duhsanta, despite being the king, is indulgent of his

friend and does not mind Madhavya's humourous barbs, at himself or others.

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4.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The next section will deal with the critical analysis of the play from the point of view of gender, caste and the notion of kingship.

4.3.1 Gender

The play has been scrutinised under various critical lenses, one of them being gender. The play provides a very fertile space to examine the concept of gender in the Vedic society and what it means today, in our contemporary world, to read such works. We will look at the role of gender as well as study its implications on the actions undertaken by the characters in the play.

Let us begin with the titular character, Shakuntala. Shakuntala, as we discussed earlier, is of semi-divine parentage as her mother is an apsara/celestial being.

Her ethereal and enchanting beauty is a testament to her apsara heritage.

Apsaras are known for their beauty but are also known for their disorderly femininity, in the sense that these women are not controlled by the strictures of the patriarchal mortal world. They are, mostly, free to act on their own accord and are seen as more sexually free than mortal women. These celestial beings were adept at music and dance and the gods used

them to disrupt the meditations of powerful ascetics, which was the case with the apsara Menaka who is Shakuntala's mother as she was sent by the God Indra to distract the sage Viswamitra from his penance. It is not surprising that the apsara's image is that of uncontrolled women, who abandon their children, and take on multiple lovers etc.

Shakuntala's apsara legacy is something that the audience would be acutely aware of and **Kalidasa** uses their dangerous femininity to show Shakuntala as a pativrata woman unlike her mother. It creates a neat contrast between women who disrupt society (apsaras) and women who uphold the mores of society (Shakuntala). In the play, when Shakuntala goes to Duhsanta's court, he accuses her of trying to pass off another man's child as his when she tells him of her pregnancy. This statement is in line with the actions expected out of apsaras, who do not behave responsibly towards children born from their encounters with men. Looking at Shakuntala's own history at being abandoned at birth and her apsara lineage, Duhsanta's accusation, though not acceptable or warranted, cannot be seen as completely ungrounded.

However, **Kalidasa** does offer a redemptive understanding of apsaras right after Duhsanta rejects Shakuntala. Abandoned by everyone, a distraught Shakuntala asks the earth to swallow her, which is reminiscent of Sita's request in the Ramayana when her chastity is questioned, and as she leaves the court her mother transports her to her heavenly hermitage.

High Priest: No sooner had Kanva's disciples left on their journey back than:

The young girl cursing her stars,

Wept aloud, flinging her hands up.

King: And then?

High Priest: A flash of light in a woman's shape From Apsara Pool,
snatched her up

And vanished straightaway.

(p.242)

This event shows us the protective and caring side of Menaka, who though

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an Apsara feels a sense of responsibility for her daughter Shakuntala's plight.



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Her mother even instructs her friend, Misrakesi, to keep an eye on Shakuntala

Abhijnana Shakuntala:

*as well as on the events unfolding in the mortal realm with Duhsanta. These **Character Analysis and***

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actions are a departure from the general understanding of these supernatural women and show a much more agreeable angle to them.

*However, this is not enough to overturn the stigma of promiscuity and assertive individuality associated with apsaras and so **Kalidasa** recreates Shakuntala in the play as an obedient, virtuous woman who is steadfast in her love (unlike apsaras) even after being abandoned. Thus, **Kalidasa** creates an image of the dutiful wife, who even in the face of injustice does not abandon her responsibilities.*

*Through Shakuntala we see **Kalidasa**'s attempt at rewriting apsara femininity in creating a compliant, dutiful, pativrata wife who would serve as an exemplary of ideal womanhood. Shakuntala is purged of her deviant femininity and can therefore be celebrated in the play as the heroine.*

The play also offers us a look into the expected female behaviour in the Vedic period through the repeated instructions on how to be an ideal wife which we see in Kanva's advice in Act IV.

Kanva: My beloved child:

Be held in high esteem by your lord

as Sarmistha was by Yayati;

as she bore Puru, may you too bear

a son to whom the whole world will bow

.... My child, you are now leaving for your husband's home; when you enter it:

Serve your elders with diligence; be a friend to your co-wives; even if wronged by your husband do not cross him through anger;

... thus do girls attain the status of mistress of the home; those who act contrary are the bane of their families.

What does our Gautami think of this?

The matron Gautami too confirms the point of view of Kanva implying that that was how young girls were trained to behave in their marital homes.

Gautami: The best advice for a young bride. (to Shakuntala) Dear daughter, keep these precepts always in mine.

(p. 227)

Gautami and the other female ascetics reiterate this advice as well. Even as her hermit companions abandon Shakuntala, these ascetics do so by telling her to do her duty as a wife and stay with the husband, even though it is clearly visible that the husband does not want her.

Sarnagarava: If you are what the King says you are, what will your father have to do with you –

a stain on his family? But, as you know

your own conduct to be pure, even servitude

in your husband's house will be welcome to you.

Stay here; we are leaving.

(p. 241)

These wifely duties are referenced to in the final act where Marica is said to be busy preaching to Aditi and the wives of other sages on the conduct of a virtuous wife. So we can see a running preoccupation with women's behaviour and how to create ideal women in the play. These dictates essentially tell women 39



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to obey their husbands and to bear them sons to carry forward the lineage,

Shakuntala

outlining their duties as mothers and wives. Nowhere do these dictates incorporate women's feelings or their personal desires. In fact, Kanva in Act IV considers women as other's wealth, to be taken care of till they are given away and is relieved that he has finally given Shakuntala away to Duhsanta.

The blatant objectification of women and their secondary position is visible here.

This helps us to understand the position that women occupied and the powers that, at least upper caste women, were allowed to exercise.

Compared to the disorderly femininity of the apsara is the patriarchal sanctioned femininity embodied in the figure of Aditi, Marica's wife and Indra's mother.

It is important to note that it is in the ordered patriarchal world of the sacred Hermitage that Shakuntala regains her marital happiness. Unlike the epic where a celestial voice asserts Shakuntala's claims and helps her or reclaim her rightful place as Duhsanta's wife, in the play their union occurs after a break of six years. This union is sanctified in the sacred Hermitage as compared to the Gandharva marriage, which was rejected.

The heavenly couple, Marica and Aditi, serve as a model for Duhsanta and Shakuntala and it is apt that their familial union occurs here. We must not forget that it is not simply the union of two lovers but of a family, which includes their son, Bharata. Thus, the play's end undercuts the romantic

aspirations of the text and takes its conclusion in the fulfillment of family life by reasserting upper caste feminine ideal. Shakuntala has thereby fulfilled her duty as a wife and mother by providing a son to continue the Puru line, which was a deep concern for the childless Duhsanta.

In this analysis we have seen how the play takes from its surrounding and influences it as well. The play's remodeling of Shakuntala as the ideal wife is a good example of how 'proper' feminine behavior is articulated and propagated.

4.3.2 Caste

Caste played a huge role in the Vedic Hindu society and it still does in today's Indian society. The four-fold structure of caste regulates everything from marriage, occupation, education, food, and religious rituals etc. In the play, right from Act I, we see how caste determines the actions of the characters. Before Duhsanta begins to actively pursue Shakuntala, he wants to ascertain her caste/

varna. A Kshatriya king cannot marry a woman of unknown caste and as stated in the Manusmriti, a man can marry a woman who is of the same caste or one caste lower, known as anuloma. Once Shakuntala's friends confirm her Kshatriya caste, Duhsanta is relieved and proceeds to woo her. Duhsanta's love for Shakuntala, whether genuine or a passing whim, cannot fall outside of the varna order and hence knowing where she stands in the varna system is important for him. This preoccupation with caste shows its central place in the society and more so for the king as the continuation of his lineage depends on the birth of sons who will carry on the father's caste.

In accordance to the caste system, sons are important as they ensure the continuation of the family's name/caste line. As such, another preoccupation in the play is the birth of a son to continue the Puru line. Duhsanta's mother is shown as keeping a fast to ensure the succession of her family and in the episode regarding the distribution of a recently deceased merchant's wealth in Act VI, Duhsanta faints at the realisation that unlike the merchant, he might 40



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not beget a son to ensure the continuation of the Puru clan. The blessings given

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by Kanva and Gautami to Shakuntala also pertain to giving birth to sons
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for the same purpose.

Another incident that shows caste prejudice is the fisherman episode where he is treated with disdain and called a thief for having found the cursed ring. The guards abuse and beat him and threaten to hang him without any proof because of their own caste superiority over the fisherman's. They assume that he must have stolen the ring because of his lower caste position. Even after Duhsanta rewards the fisherman for having found the ring, the guards do not apologise for their cruel behaviour but are instead irritated at the reward being given to him. It is only when the fisherman offers to share the reward by buying alcohol for them that, they become friendly. This incident displays the hypocrisy of the caste system where differences can easily be surpassed when it comes to money.

Greed seems to know no caste.

As we have seen till now, caste is not overtly noticeable in the play but if we peel back the layers and examine the text, we find caste assumptions and prejudices that underlie the actions of the characters.

4.3.3 Kingship

The play is not just a romance between a man and a woman but of a king and a semi-divine woman. Duhsanta is also described as the sage king,

having the virtue, wisdom as well as the power to rule over his kingdom. Therefore, it is Duhsanta's duty to protect those in need, which is what gives him the opportunity to woo Shakuntala in the Hermitage. He is also responsible for maintaining order in his kingdom and Indra even calls upon him to help them defeat the demons/ asuras and help restore cosmic order. His confirmation of Shakuntala's caste, as discussed above is also in keeping with his duty to maintain the social order.

When he departs the forest, he gives Shakuntala his signet ring with his name on it. The ring is a symbol of his kingship and a surety of his promise to send for her and make her his queen. The loss of the ring combined with the curse puts into doubt the veracity of Shakuntala's claims and thus Shakuntala's rejection is seen as justified by the people in the court. In the epic, Duhsanta rejects both Shakuntala and his son, but here it is a lonely Shakuntala with her unborn son. However, it is Duhsanta's duty to also provide an heir to continue the Puru line.

The King's desire for a son is of paramount importance for the benefit of the kingdom as well. Thus, when he rejects Shakuntala and the unborn son, he is doing so not just as a man but also as a king. Being the king, he cannot accept any child as his without confirming the parentage. Nonetheless, we see how desperate Duhsanta is for a son when he agrees to the High Priest's idea that if the child bears the auspicious marks prophesised for his son, he will accept both Shakuntala and the child as his. Thus, the need for a son to bequeath the kingdom to and insure its safety and prosperity far outweigh the truth of Shakuntala's claims and the justice denied to her.

As a king, there are times when Duhsanta forgets his duty, specifically before the consummation of his desire for Shakuntala and after the revelation of the curse. In both these instances, he languishes firstly, in his unfulfilled desire and later in his remorse for treating Shakuntala so cruelly. He becomes dejected and has to be roused from this lethargy as such prolonged neglect of his duty 41



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*is not only bad for the kingdom but also can incite criticism and rebellion.
The*

Shakuntala

*resolution in the play is therefore not just for Duhsanta, Shakuntala, and
Bharata to achieve the required happy familial union but also for the
smooth functioning of the kingdom and for its secure future.*

4.4

LET US SUM UP

*By this time we have finished reading the text *The Loom of Time*, we have
gone through each unit and are now in a position to see how **Kalidasa** has
used his characters to narrate the story of *Shakuntala* and how he deviates
from the Sanskrit norms as well as the epic by playing with the audiences
expectations of the characters.*

The critical analysis will equip us to

*understand the various lenses through which the play can be read and will
help us expand our understanding of the play. However, we should keep in
mind the fact that though we as 21st Century readers analyse the play
from our point in time and our location, and through various 20th and
21st Century critical tools, what we see as blatant disregard for a woman's
honour and dignity was the norm and even today in many parts of the
country it still is how women are regarded. For instance, we may recall
hearing women in our own families or women who work for us say things
like a daughter cannot stay forever in her parental home or that a
daughter's *Dholi* (wedding entourage) leaves her parental home and her*

arathi (Funeral procession) will leave from her marital home. Or even that their burdens will become lighter once the daughter(s) are married off. Then again, we keep reading about honour killings and of deaths related to inter caste marriages so the question really is have we really moved away from the time of Shakuntala and **Kalidasa**? Just leaving you with food for thought!

4.5 QUESTIONS

1.

Discuss the points of contrast between the two Shakuntala episodes in the Mahabharata and the Loom of Time/ Abhijnana Shakuntala.

2.

Discuss the evocation of the vira (heroism) and the srngara (love) rasa in the play.

3.

Abhijana Shakuntalam is a dramatisation of the conflicts of the private and the public and of desire and duty. Discuss.

4.

Discuss the rejection and recognition scene in the play.

5.

What is the relevance of the curse and the ring in the play?

6.

Duhsanta leaves his kingly authority behind when he enters the Hermitage.

Do you agree?

7.

Comment on the treatment of women in play with reference to any three female characters.

8.

Write a note on the role of Madhavya as Vidusaka.

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

The second Block in this course looks at certain sections of the Indian Epic the Mahabharata. We are all aware of this epic, be it through religious texts that our grandmothers' might have read out loud, through the TV Serial produced by B R Chopra in the late 1990s (1988), the slightly later version telecast by Star Plus between 2013 and 2014, or even via Amar Chitra Katha.

The Mahabharata, is an epic that deals primarily with the story of two families laying claim to the throne of Hastinapur. The tragedy is the two families are of two brothers – the Kauravas and the Pandavas. This ongoing skirmish between the two families ultimately culminates in the battle of Kurukshetra where the 100 Kauravas are killed and the Pandavas emerge victorious aided by the guidance of Krsna. However, the Mahabharata is not just the story of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. There are a number of little tales, myths, and anecdotes in this huge Epic and in a sense it is a treasure trove of cultural content.

Let us now plunge right into media res, into the thick of things and begin by reading the translated text and then going through the Units. You are required to read ‘The Dicing’, ‘The Sequel to Dicing’, ‘The Book of the Assembly Hall’,

‘The Temptation of Karna’ and ‘The Book of Effort from the Mahabharata’, Selections from the Sabha Prava and Udyos Prava, Trans. J A B Bitenen.

Ed. Kanav Gupta & Meha Pande, Delhi: Worldview, 2016.

Good Luck with your work!



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Vyas: Mahabharata



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UNIT 1 THE MAHABHARATA: AN

OVERVIEW

Structure

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Introduction

1.2 The Structure of the Mahabharata

1.3 The Complex Narrative

1.3.1 The Question of Authorship and Reworking of the Narrative 1.3.2 Folk Tales, Fables and Parables in the Mahabharata 1.3.3

Social Life at the Time

1.4 The Mahabharata as a Literary Text

1.5 The Role of Fate and Chance

1.6 The Meaning of Dharma: The Law

1.7 Contemporary Interpretations of the Mahabharata 1.8 Let Us Sum Up

1.9 Hints to Check Your Progress

1.10 Glossary

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to acquaint you with the diverse material that is available on the ancient Indian Epic the Mahabharata. It is to provide you

with a perspective on the entire text along with its reception over the centuries. Certain elements pertaining to the form and structure of the epic have been discussed in order to clearly define the nature of the text which would help us in evaluating it better, as being students of Literature, we also need to develop critical skills.

In the next section, we shall introduce the Mahabharata as a text, not the comic form or the TV Serial version.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Mahabharata is the name of an Indian oral epic to begin with and compiled traditionally in Sanskrit later on, charting the story of a family involved in a tussle that leads to a battle. The epic is in effortless verse and has many episodes.

Each story or episode has a beginning and an ending so that, these appear as individuals pieces while still being loosely connected to one another. The Mahabharata is a story of kinship and conflict for dynasty. It is thus, the story of a family quarrel in verse involving the two warring groups the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The succession conflict begins when Yudhisthira seeks a fair share for the Pandavas - rule of a mere five villages. When he is denied this rightful claim, the struggle for inheritance begins and the question of 'who is the rightful heir?' is posed and emphasised.

Tracing the roots of the epic poem, we find that the epic is about the Dynasty of King Bharata. We are told that:

The text of the Mahabharata is sometimes supposed to have developed in three stages. The first was that of 8800 verses called Jaya, the second of 23000 verses called Bharata, and the third of 100,000 verses called the Mahabharata.

(Pande, 37)



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It is believed that in an earlier time the work was called “Jaya” (victory), that it was a poem of triumph which recounted the tale of a king who wins over his rival kinsmen. If we are to split the word Mahabharata into two syllables

– Maha and Bharata, Maha would refer to “the great”; and Bharata to the “story”. Hence, the epic could also mean “Mahabharata” or “The Great Story.” Having said that by way of an introduction to the epic, it is but pertinent that we look at what an Epic is next.

An epic is a heroic poem with a long narrative and a serious subject matter.

It is a collection of a series of events but has at least one major happening that determines the fate of humanity at large. Epics are often of national/ universal significance and deal with warriors, legends, folktales, and histories. The setting of the epic is usually grand and involves superhuman actions. It depicts larger than life scenes, vivid descriptions, long speeches and elaborate greetings, digressions as also hardships, long arduous journeys and misadventures. The epic encompasses a large timeframe that may include generations and ages. It is wide-ranging in time and space as also in its cast of characters. This is a generic introduction to the Epic form as most of us will know and is true of most Epics be they oral or written, of the West or the East. Epics do have some common features and we shall examine them next.

Narrator — Every Epic has a narrator and epics also normally begin with an invocation / prayer to the Gods and this invocation is usually performed by the narrator, who then, sets the epic in motion. The narrator may introduce the epic question that would be dealt with, in the work and, around which the entire narrative is built. The theme and question is

related to a general truth—

it could open a debate on war and justice since both are important themes in epics.

Episodic in nature — An epic has several episodes each connected to the other but each with its own beginning and ending. While these episodes have a bearing on one another they are logically complete in themselves. This is an essential quality of an epic.

Grandiloquent — The style of an epic is formal and grandiloquent, which means the narration must be both grand in scope and eloquent in expression. The epic would reject ordinary speech in favour of oratory and stylised language. It would often have epic conventions and epic similes.

Heroic — An epic has a hero (es) who have extraordinary or divine power.

The hero is either a progeny of a god or a disciple. The hero of the epic is able to interact with the gods and in crucial moments see the gods in their divine avatar. These heroic characters are able to draw strength and knowledge from the gods who play an important role in their lives. There is a union between the human and the divine in the epic. At the same time, the heroes are not mere observers or spectators of events. They are participants and agents of change. These characters work out in their minds the different perspectives and take decisions as well as act on them.

In the Mahabharata, however, no one person is heroic as in the case of the Ramayan a (another Indian epic of significance). The Mahabharata is meant to be a record of human beings who fall prey to temptations. Unlike the Ramayana, which is focused on the character of Ram, the Mahabharata focuses on the complexity of events and characters spread over three generations. The 6



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latter is not a one-man show and in this sense closer to our reality than the **The Mahabharata:An**

former. However, while the Ramayana is an epic in praise of an ideal man,
Overview

the Mahabharata focuses on human weaknesses. The Mahabharata has a spate of characters important to the narrative while in the Ramayana, everything revolves around the figure of Ram and his actions. This makes the Mahabharata more realistic. It is seen as a historical epic spanning across generations. While in the Ramayana 'god' is at the centre of the narrative, in the Mahabharata it is the human being in interaction with the gods who occupies centre-stage.

It has been suggested that the Mahabharata does not fit in the western model of the heroic epic. It in fact:

Reflects the critical representation of a bygone heroic age from the point of view of a subsequent age of enlightenment

(Pande, 38)

Thus, the European idea of the epic cannot be applied to the Mahabharata per se, even as the text has epic dimension and deploys freely the characteristics of the epic.

Human-Divine characters — some gods appear as characters in epics and they have a part to play in the narrative. They make the human being the object of inquiry as they keep testing the strength and vigour of the important characters.

For instance, the narrative acquaints us with the author **Vyas**, who is a god who has taken a human avatar. Similar is the case with the character of Krsna in the text.

Temperament and moral attitude— each character in the epic displays a particular temperament and moral attitude. This determines their speech and behaviour.

By extension they become the epitome of the set of values they hold dear.

In this way the conflict between characters in the epic actually becomes a conflict between two value systems.

Optimism — An Epic is meant to have a positive end which promises a better and just world. Good must be rewarded and evil punished. The

Mahabharata in many ways can be looked at as a fight between good and evil as also dharma and adharma.

These are some of the important constituents of an epic in general, the Indian epic and the text under consideration – the Mahabharata in particular. Let us now briefly look at the structure of the Mahabharata.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What is an Epic?

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2) What are some of the common features of an Epic?

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1.2 THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAHABHARATA

The Mahabharata has a principal narrative that binds the entire work and all the episodes together. The Epic is divided into eighteen books and a Khila/





Vyas: Mahabharata

Harivamsa Parva, (which is ‘The Book of the Genealogy of Hari’, an addendum to those parts of the life of Krsna that are not covered in the 18

Parvas of the Mahabharata), that are called parvas and each book has several sub-books. Each Parva has its own structure—a beginning and an end unified by action. The eighteen books are as follows: Adi Parva with 7982 couplets; Sabha Parva with 2511 couplets; Vana Parva containing 11663 couplets; Virata Parva having 2500 couplets; Udyog Parva –6698

couplets; Bhishma Parva –5863; Drona Parva—8909, Karna Parva 3900; Shalya Parva—

3220; Sauptija Parva—870; Stri Parva—775; Shanti Parva—13525; Anushasana Parva—6700; Ashvamedhika Parva—3320; Ashramavasika Parva –1506; Mausala Parva—300; Mahaprasthanika Parva—120; Svargarohana Parva—200 and the Khila/ Harivamsa Parva, as mentioned earlier. In the next section, we shall look at the complexities in the narrative of the Mahabharata.

Sauti reciting the Shlokas of the Mahabharata, [wikipedia.org]

1.3 THE COMPLEX NARRATIVE

The first page of the Mahabharata does not introduce us to the royal courts (which would occupy much of the action later) with its dynastic struggles but the humble surroundings of a hermitage where sages are gathered to perform a ritual lasting twelve years. Here Ugrashrava, the bard, is urged by the seers assembled in the Naimisa forest to recite the interesting and grand tale of the Bharatas, as recited earlier by Vaishampayana to King Janamejaya. This sets the tone for the beginning of the narrative.

It is believed that Krsna Dvaipayana Vyas composed the Mahabharata. He is understood to be a participant in the events and a trustworthy eye witness.

As author of the text he narrates the story to his disciples. According to certain religious readings of the text, “of the pupils to whom Vyasa told this story, Narada recited it to the Gods, Asita Devala to the Ancestors, his son Shuka to the Gandharvas, Yakshas, and Rakshasas, and Vaishampayana to the mortals” (Mehta, 72). Vyas’s disciple Vaishampayana narrates the tale to King 8

Janamejaya (son of King Parikshita and grandson of Abhimanyu) of



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Hastinapura who wished to know about the deeds of his ancestors.

The Mahabharata:An

Vaishampayana narrates the Mahabharata to the assembly present at the court **Overview**

at the sacrifice of the Nagas. The tale as recited by Vaishampayana to King Janamejaya is heard by one Ugrashrava, the son of a bard (famous story-teller) and he recounts it to a group of sages who are involved in performing sacrifices and rituals for twelve years. The narrative is thus, tortuous.

The Mahabharata as a whole is recited by Ugrashrava /the loud voiced, who may be seen as the first narrator of the book. The second narrator is Vaishampayana who narrates in the first person the story up to a point making way for the third narrator Sanjaya, who recounts the battle scene step – by

- step, following which Vaishampayna resumes his narrative. A number of stories within the text are recounted by other narrators as well.

1.3.1 The Question of Authorship and Reworking of the Narrative

It is believed that a generation of narrators conforming to the changes in language and style in their specific context, reworked the text of the Mahabharata. For instance, many critics believe that the “Bhagvad Gita” was a later addition and does not essentially fit in the logic of the text. Many episodes and legends too, it is believed have been added to the original composition of Vyasa. Thus, we have stories within stories. The Mahabharata for us, in this sense, has many narrators and authors. Also, “the essential thing in such oral communication is that from the very beginning, the story is told to someone, by someone face-to - face,

somewhere, at some point of time, where the teller and the auditor are in an engaged relationship with the story told". Thus, each time the text was told, new elements were added to it that was specific to the context of the teller and the auditor. The oral tradition enabled many versions of the Mahabharata. With later scholarship, the Mahabharata attained a standard form when it was passed on as a written text meant to be read and not heard.

M A Mehendale has suggested that the Mahabharata "has come down to us not in its original form but with many additions made in it, in the course of its long transmission, first by reciters and later by writers of manuscripts at different places and different times". These interpolations in the Mahabharata are only natural as he further suggests that "it would have been a matter of great surprise if a popular text like the Mbh. (Mahabharata) which was orally transmitted for many centuries was not burdened with many additions"

(Interpolations in the Mahabharata, 2001, 195). In fact, oral literature is defined as a collective ownership by a community or a people who add to the compositions passed on from one generation to another. This kind of literature is often attributed as folk literature.

1.3.2 Folk Tales, Fables and Parables in the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is also a part of a strong folk tradition in India which is freely adapted and reworked; new fables and parables have been added over the centuries. Still, there is a lyrical quality about the text as it was sung by bards at courts as also by wandering minstrels. Written in simple verse form, the Mahabharata like the Ramayana was a narrative that was sung from place to place. Underpinning the significance of the folk tale several critics have viewed the great epic as primarily divided into "two main parts (i) The main story of the Kauravas and the Pandavas and (ii) the vast tale-literature" (Dange ix).

Further it has been observed that,



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Tales like the 'Swan and the Crow', 'the Pigeon' Sacrifice' or 'the Bidalavrata' come under fable while 'king Brahmadata and Piyani'

and 'Sibi' can be classed as parables, the difference being that in the former the whole tale is told as of the beasts and birds while in the latter we have human being as the central figure. Both the fable type and the parable type of tales are one in the point of a purpose which is –imparting instructions...

(Dange, Legends in the Mahabharata, xxxvii, 1969).

Thus, the Mahabharata is didactic in tone and is meant to be a manual of a moral code of conduct. However, it also has strong contemplative and philosophical strains that bring into focus the dilemma of human choice and venture. Let's look at the society at the time of the Mahabharata next.

1.3.3 Social Life at the Time

What was society like at the time when the Mahabharata was composed?

For that we need to ascertain when the Mahabharata was composed. Critics differ on the exact dates but it has been largely agreed that it was composed around 1000 B.C. This constitutes India's ancient period. G C Pande tells us that:

The society described in the Mahabharata is regularly conceived as a fourfold one, one, that, consisted of the four Varnas. It has been opined that the Kshatriyas constituted the pre-eminent class in this society because of their control of political power...

(An Age of Change, 53)

It is also believed that the social tussle for supremacy defined the relation

between the Brahmanas (who had the traditional role of advising the King and performed sacred rituals) and the Kshattriya s who managed royal power and defended the state.

Ksattriyas had a definite code of morality to guide them. They were expected to be hospitable, never to refuse protection to a refugee, never to forget a good deed or an injury, never to refuse a challenge,

(53)

The Pandavas in the text can be seen practicing these laws—for instance, Bhima particularly would not forget the injury done by the Kauravas at the time of the Dicing, and Yudhisthira could not refuse once challenged by Shakuni at the game of dice. In any case,

The social landscape of the Mahabharata is largely sylvan and rural.

The forests are abode of hermits and Sabaras. Nisadas and Candalas exemplified the tribals.

(Pande 50)

The peasantry mainly consisted of vaishyas. There were mostly villages and mention of some towns and cities (such as Hastinapura, Indraprastha, Mathura and Mithila) make us aware that these were centres of money, market and trade. With regard to the region and the culture we find that “agriculture and cattle breeding, craft and trade constituted the mainstay of economic life”.

Also there was prevalence of slavery. The following observation of Duryodhana makes us aware of it when seeing the pomp and show of Indraprastha, he says,

There are eighty-eight thousand snataka householders whom 10

Yudhisthira supports, each of them with thirty slave girls.



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*Eventually we find that the two important places– Hastinapura (situated
The Mahabharata:An*

*somewhere near modern Delhi) and Indraprastha, become contending
centres **Overview***

*of power. In the next section we shall look at the Mahabharata as a
Literary Text.*

Check Your Progress 2

*1) Comment on the important narrators in the Mahabharata. Who is the
tale being told to?*

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2) How have folktales, parables and myths been used in the Mahabharata?

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3) Construct an image of society during the time of the Mahabharata.

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1.4 THE MAHABHARATA AS A LITERARY TEXT

What is the Mahabharata? Is it a historical text or a poetic expression of the times? Is it a book of moral laws and scriptures? These questions necessarily come to mind when dealing with ancient literature. **Sheldon Pollock** explains It (the Mahabharata) represents itself for most part as *itihasa*, an account of 'the way things indeed were'. However, much modern scholarship may complicate the factuality of that record... Yet the Mahabharata was not only *itihasa*, it was also *kavya*.

Note, that as **Pollock** suggests, the Mahabharata represents itself as a historical narrative depicting events as they took place by, one who is also a character in the narrative—**Vyas**. The author is the composer of the tale and a participant in the story.

Viewed from a literary angle, the historical framework is a form adopted by **Vyas**. Still, **Pollock** notes,

Eventually the Mahabharata came to also be viewed as a transcendently authoritative moral discourse; one ninth century literary theorist conceived of the work as 'moral discourse with the aura of literature.

(Sheldon Pollock)

At the same time the Mahabharata has been viewed as a political narrative.

T R S Sharma has observed that:

While the Kuru and the Panhala lineages are historically recorded, there is no mention of Pandavas in any historical records. So it is only proper we consider the Mahabharata as an epic poem.

(Ed. T R S Sharma. 5)

Thus, for us the primary concern is to view the Mahabharata as a literary text with an internal logic and structure—the text never wavers from the core 11



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narrative that is the struggle between two groups of cousins for succession and political power.

*From the literary point of view, the Mahabharata has been analysed in different ways. According to **Anandavardhana** (the famous Sanskrit literary critic of the 9th AD) known primarily for his work “Dhvanyalok”, the Mahabharata is a “dhvani-kavya” or the poetry of suggestion. The suggested sense and creation of “dhvani-alok”, found in the Mahabharata in his view, is the highest form of poetic composition. With respect to its content, he notes that the Mahabharata*

... teaches man ultimately to renounce vanity of earthly glories and attain dharma (truth and righteousness), vairagya (renunciation), santi (eternal peace) and moksha (salvation)

(qtd. in Julian F. Woods 163)

*With respect to form, **J P Sinha** has provided us with the following classifications:*

.....the metres which have been employed in the Mahabharata may be classified under two heads—the varnavratas and the matravratas...so far the matravratas are concerned only aryaais are to be found in the Mahabharata and that too in a small number.

He suggests that, “the vast majority of the verses of the Mahabharata are composed in the anustubh metre”. The anustubh is a sloka, is a metre of four feet of eight syllables each. In the anustubh the fifth letter of all the feet and the seventh of the second and fourth feet must necessarily be short, similarly, the sixth letter of every foot must be long. After anustubh the largest number of verses in the Mahabharata has been composed in the

upjati metre (9)

The anustubh was used in the oldest written document, the Rigveda and is known for its simple structure. The simple metre enabled recitation. Thus, didactic literature and moral tales were written using this metre.

*The original text in Sanskrit is almost entirely in verse while the English translation of the Mahabharata by **J A B van Buitenen** is largely in prose. **Buitenen** tells us that the*

... verse syntax in Sanskrit is quite free and an easy-on-the-ear-attention adjective qualifying a subject at the beginning may comfortably appear at the end of the couplet

(xi)

Taking about the variations in the text he suggests: Unlike the Homeric epics, the Mahabharata employs a variety of meters, but by far the commonest used is the sloka. This meter presents a very free pattern well suited to narratives. Like all Sanskrit meters, it is divided into two halves, each half containing in its case sixteen syllables, while each half divides into two quarters (padas) of eight syllables each. The first four syllables of each eight are free, the second four parsed.

(xxxviii)

Thus, the Mahabharata is defined by its simple verse form and lyrical quality.

The meter and style varies in the text in relation to the subject being narrated.

It may reflect the mood of the poet as also the times. Let us examine the role 12

of fate and chance in the Mahabharata next.



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1.5 THE ROLE OF FATE AND CHANCE

Overview

The Mahabharata fosters the idea of destiny as unalterable. Foreknowledge of events cannot correct grievous wrongs nor can it prevent them from happening.

There is a kind of failure of human endeavour that gets established with the notion of predetermined fate. And yet, human choice is provided adequate importance in the text. The characters in the epic do not give up when faced with dilemma, they go through the struggle of choosing a path and following it. The innate impulse in human beings to strive and act even when faced with odds keeps the text human-centric and optimistic.

Interestingly, Duryodhana fosters the idea of fate that plays against him while fortune favors the Pandavas in the scenes preceding the dicing sequence. He claims:

Fate, methinks reign supreme and man's acts are meaningless, when I see such bright fortune fetched to the Pandava. In the past I have made attempts to kill him, Saubala, but he survived it all and grew like a lotus in the water. Therefore, methinks, fate reigns supreme and man's acts are meaningless, for the Dhartarastras decline and the Parthas are always prospering.

(8)

The idea that a man's acts are meaningless is reiterated in the Mahabharata time and again. In fact, it appears to be the central truth of life and emphasises determinism. Yudhishthira is saddened by the truth

divulged to him by **Vyas** in the text that, bitter animosity among the cousins is in store—one that would wipe out most of the Kshatriyas from the earth. Yudhisthira tries in vain to cement ties and build friendly relations with Duryodhan. His vow to not get angry at the instigation of his cousins or brothers is a case in point. Events as they unfold in the epic show us that destiny takes its course and no one can turn the course of events. Thus, human endeavours, whatever their nature, are shown to be meaningless. Can we agree with such a proposition? Is our destiny predefined and any attempt to change it meaningless? Should we accept the given circumstances or strive to change them? The Mahabharata leaves us with such uneasy questions that are relevant in our time as well. Let us look at the notion of dharma/ the law in the context of the Mahabharata in the next section.

Check Your Progress 3

1) In what way is the Mahabharata different from the western epic? What makes it realistic and human?

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2) Is the Mahabharata a literary text? Discuss.

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3) Would you agree with the view that a human being cannot change his/ her destiny? Examine the notion of fate in the Mahabharata.

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Vyas: Mahabharata

1.6 THE MEANING OF DHARMA: THE LAW

The concept of dharma is central to the epic the Mahabharata. The text underpins the idea of “Yatho dharma: tatho jayah” (Where Dharma is, there is victory). However, dharma stands inverted in many a case in the text. The law is often subverted, and dharma involves an arduous struggle as it extracts its price from those who follow it. The presence of dharma and its reiteration in the text is often accompanied by its negation. And yet the term dharma is important for the concept of existence in the Mahabharata. It gives meaning to the notion of existence as well as direction to the characters.

*Dharma is translated by **J A B van Buitenen** in the text as the ‘Law’. This may facilitate the English reader to some extent, however, to the Indian reader the term is incomplete and needs to be understood in relation to the ideas of*

*‘truth’, ‘justice’, ‘morality’, ‘righteousness’, ‘code of conduct’, ‘obligation’ as also ‘duty’. Dharma denotes all these. Dharma is defined by a person’s position in society and the role one plays. There is the King’s law (dharma) which defines what the King ought to do and his acts are based on an ethical awareness of his duties. He is meant to follow the principle of justice above all. There is the dharma of a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a father, a mother, a husband, and a wife, each of which determine human relationships. The roles come with pre-determined laws that the characters are supposed to live up to. It is this dharma that Draupadi calls out to in the Dicing sequence and it is dharma alone which keeps the Pandava brothers quiet when Yudhisthira loses them in a game of dice. The question of dharma haunts the Pandavas even after the fateful war has been won by them—a war fought for land. The Pandavas perform the horse sacrifice to establish their sovereignty. **Sheldon Pollock** has*

suggested, “If the Pandavas’ political power has now been confirmed, both the war and the Kali Age it has inaugurated have sapped their strength and will: ‘Cursed be the law of power’, they declare, ‘that has left us dead in life’, they eventually renounce sovereignty and begin the mahaprasthan, the Great Departure” towards Mount Himavan. Thus, the Law of power destroys them as it did their counterparts in war. Both sides stand to lose.

Though the Mahabharata is an ancient text, as mentioned in the Block Introduction, it has been serialised twice on television by two different production houses, and is also available in comic form printed by Amar Chitra Katha.

Even today, the text is read aloud in many households. Having said that, can we assume that the text is somehow still relevant in some way even today in 2019? The next section will examine contemporary interpretations of the Mahabharata to give us a sense of how such an ancient text still has a hold on people’s imagination even today.

1.7 CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF

THE MAHABHARATA

Discussing the modern retellings of the Mahabharata, we find that the context of the adaptations is juxtaposed with the world of the ancient text. The complexities of human endeavour elaborated in the original text become a constant reference point for later retellings.

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Scholarship on the Mahabharata has steadily increased over the last century.

The Mahabharata:An

Several critical works have opened new dimensions of the text. On the other **Overview**

hand, creative versions of the Mahabharata have also come to the fore.

Characters and events of the Mahabharata have received renewed interest among writers. Its influence has been pan-India and the text has been adapted freely. For instance, the Telugu writer **Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad** (b. 1953), has written a novel titled *Draupadi* that charts different aspects of Draupadi's character as a strong woman, confidante, mother and daughter. Similarly, **Pratibha Rai**, the Odiya writer has written a novel titled *Yagyaseni*, written in the form of a letter where Draupadi explains her plight to Krsna. In fact, in Odisha, as early as in the 15th century, **Sarala Das** (Odisha's 'Adikavi') presented an Odiya Mahabharata. His Mahabharata however carried various indigenous myths and legends as also Odiya folklore. Similar, is the case with Assamese versions of the Mahabharata where medieval poets and translators selected parts of the epic keeping the core story of the fraternal feud intact and created a new text out of it. For instance, the Assamese *Nariparva* written by an unknown author is not a mere translation of the Sanskrit *Striparva*—

in the Assamese version the women of the two warring groups take up arms and fight one another even after the men have died. Draupadi here leads the Pandava women and with her excellent knowledge of war she wins it by deploying her weapon, the *vayu-astra*. Variations such as these make the text of the Mahabharata more productive (in that there is always scope for a new narrative to emerge) and compelling.

The first Marathi novel influenced by the Mahabharata was *Viratparva-Hyabi Bakhar* written by **Chintamanshastri Thatte** and published in 1862 this was followed by *Pativrata Savitri* written by **S N Joshi** (1929) and *Astika* (1940), by **P S Sane** alias **Sane Guruji**. The Mahabharata continued to influence novels post independence with the publication of the Marathi novel *Yayati: A Classic Tale of Lust* (1959) by the Jnanpith Awardee, **Vishnu Khandekar**, exploring the life of the Pandavas's ancestors. The play by **Girish Karnad** too, with the same title *Yayati* (1960), was inspired by the Mahabharata. Add to this, the reworking of the Mahabharata that exists in Malayalam literature. From early representations by poets of the 13th and 15th centuries such as *Bharatmala* by **Niranam** poets, *Bharatam Gatha* by **Cherusseri** to contemporary reinterpretations of the 20th century offered by **P K Balakrishnan** and **M T**

Vasudevan in their novels *Eni Jnan Urangatte* (Let Me Sleep Now, 1973) and *Randamoozham* (*The Second Turn*, 1983), respectively, the unique

place of the canonical epic is revealed to us. Still, **Dharamvir Bharati's** play *Andha Yug* evokes the post-war world of devastation in the Mahabharata to speak about the contemporary malaise caused by the partition of the country in 1947.

The Mahabharata in this sense has a bearing on current happenings and writers make use of myths and stories to express their views of the times. In more recent times, **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni** (b. 1956), has written a novel from Drapaudi's perspective called, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008).

The Mahabharata has been extensively projected on stage, television series (of **B R Chopra and Ravi Chopra (1988 – 90)**; and **Swastik Productions (2013- 2016)**); and cinema (**Shyam Benegal's Kalyug** 1980). Among western 15



Vyas: Mahabharata

admirers of the epic we have the French playwright **Jean-Claude Carriere** who staged the Mahabharata (as a French play, nine hours long) in 1985.

Peter Brook, adapted it for his cinematic reproduction of the Mahabharata (the film) in 1989. Both these adaptations offered a 20th century westerner's view of the Mahabharata.

Here, the western and the eastern contexts combine. However, **Peter Brook's** representation particularly has been viewed by several critics in India (**Gautam Dasgupta, Rustom Bharucha**) as an exercise in Orientalism for it exoticises and appropriates Indian culture. **Ramesh Menon's** *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering* (2 Volumes) (published in 2003) provides to the English reader the ancient tale in a novelistic form from an Indian perspective.

Gurucharan Das's *The Difficulty of Being Good* explores the concept of

dharma as explicated by the Mahabharata and tests its validity in contemporary society. These are but a few instances that acquaint us with the vast reach and influence of the Mahabharata in the Indian region and beyond. We have managed quite an over view of the Mahabharata and we think we should summarise all that has been said so far before we end this episode/ unit in the Mahabharata fashion and move on to the next episode/ unit.

Check Your Progress 4

1) Write a note on the role dharma plays in determining the lives of the characters in the Mahabharata.

.....

.....

.....

2) Have you watched the Mahabharata or read any of the works based on the Mahabharata ? What do you think this tells you about the Mahabharata ?

.....

.....

.....

1.8 LET US SUM UP

Having watched the Mahabharata at some point in our lives or read the comic version or even read *The Palace of Illusions*, and gone through this unit, you would have noticed that the Mahabharata has a deep cultural and historical significance in the Indian subcontinent. In the discussion it is evident that the text of the Mahabharata underwent modifications in different regions at different points of time. It has become a text that is ever-productive as new narratives continue to spring from it. Still, the discussion on authorship made us privy to the fact that, the Mahabharata may have been composed by **Vyas** but it has gone through many additions in the later centuries. It is in this sense a collective/

social epic. Also the complex narrative tells us that the text was meant for recitation and not reading. It belonged to the oral-folk literature of India.

The unit focused on the idea of the epic and particularly the Indian epic to

facilitate a better understanding of the text. The question of form was taken up in the discussion in order to place the Mahabharata within a literary framework so that we can view it as a text governed by specific aesthetic principles. In so far, as the themes of the text are concerned, the major theme of dharma as also pre-determined fate has been outlined in this unit. The social set-up of the times in which the Mahabharata is believed to have been composed has also been provided in this unit to help us contextualise the narrative 16

vis-à-vis the Indian society of that period.



The Mahabharata:An

1.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Overview

Check Your Progress 1

1) Read Section 1.1 carefully, understand it, and then frame the answer in your own words.

2) Read Section 1.1

Check Your Progress 2

1) Read 1.3 & 1.3.1

2) Read Section 1.3.2

3) Read Section 1.3.3

Check Your Progress 3

1) Read Section 1.4

2) Read Section 1.4

3) Read Section 1.5

Check Your Progress 4

1) Read Section 1.6

2) Read Section 1.7

1.10 GLOSSARY

Epic simile is an extended simile running into several lines in which the comparisons are elaborated in great detail. These are “formal sustained similes in which the secondary subject, or vehicle, is elaborated far beyond its specific points of close parallel to the primary subject, or tenor, to which it is compared”

(M H Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms)

Epic Conventions: Epic conventions are formal characteristics that epic poems generally share such as: In medias res; Invocation; Statement of theme; Stock epithets; Cataloguing; Long, formal speeches; Divine Intervention; Epic Digressions; Vast Settings; Grandiose/Elevated Language; Definitive Meter; Epic Battles; Descent into the Underworld; Epic Similes; Didactic Nature; Dire, Foreshadowing Warnings; Heroic Oath

(unisophomoreenglish.wordpress.com/09/13/epicconversion/)

Avatar: A manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth; an incarnate divine teacher; An incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a person or idea; An icon or figure representing a particular person in a video game, Internet forum, etc. From the Sanskrit avatâra ‘descent’, from ava ‘down’

+ tar- ‘to cross’

(oxforddictionaries.com/definition/avata)

Dharma: Explanation in Section 1.6

Adharma: unrighteousness or wickedness

Orientalism: Literally refers to writings about the Orient (the East) as imagined, understood and defined by Europe /the West. It is about the attitude of the western writers towards the eastern parts of the world. As a

term of discourse it was used by Edward Said in his book Orientalism (1978) to elaborate the distorted view the occident (the outsiders) hold of the orient/east.

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UNIT 2 “THE DICING” FROM THE

BOOK OF THE ASSEMBLY

HALL

Structure

2.0

Objectives

2.1

Introduction

2.2

Duryodhana's Misery and the Grandeur of the Pandavas 2.2.1

Sakuni's Reassurance and Conspiracy

2.2.2

The Emotional Manipulation of Dhrtarastra

2.3

Reversal of Fortune

2.4

The Game of Dice

2.4.1

Yudhisthira's Dharma

2.4.2

Losing the Kingdom, Brothers and Self in Gambling

2.4.3

Losing Draupadi

2.5

The Case of Draupadi

2.5.1

Humiliation of Draupadi

2.5.2

The Legal Point and Draupadi's Questions

2.5.3

2.6

Let Us Sum Up

2.7

Hints to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The present unit will help us to critically analyse the epic under study - the Mahabharata. It will acquaint us with the major themes of the epic in general and the episode of 'The Dicing' in particular. Here, questions of Dharma, the law and its relevance in the lives of the characters will be explored at some length. A discussion on some unexplored aspects of Duryodhana's character will also be undertaken. We will then be in a position to also decipher the workings of power and wealth. Importantly, the character of Draupadi and the significance of events that follow the dicing game will be evaluated in detail.

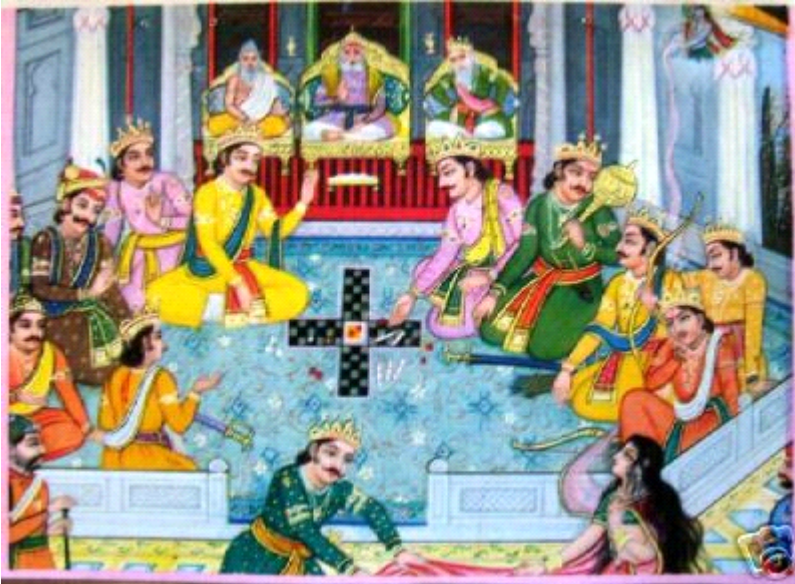
This will help us see the place and condition of women in ancient times. These and other related questions will be explored. In the next section we will get a brief idea of the background of 'The Dicing' which is the prescribed text under study. If you have not read the text, please do so immediately.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

We are made aware in the beginning of the "Book of the Assembly Hall" that the Pandavas have risen to great power and a "celestial" assembly hall has been built by Maya, a 'Danava' to reciprocate the good acts of Arjun who rescued him. Despite all attempts of the Kauravas to cause harm to the Pandavas, the latter shine in the splendour of newly acquired wealth."The Dicing" from the "Book of the Assembly Hall" (Sabha Parva) shows us that Duryodhana has been overpowered and tricked by the marvels of Yudhisthira's palace. Let us look at the causes of Duryodhana's misery next.



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“The Dicing” from the

2.2

DURYODHANA’S MISERY AND THE

Book of the Assembly Hall

GRANDEUR OF THE PANDAVAS

Duryodhana having witnessed the exuberance of Yudhishtra's 'Maya' palace at the Rajasuya sacrifice is in acute distress and despair that is incurable. He recounts the tale to his maternal uncle Sakuni who in turn tries to pacify his nephew but in vain. For in trying to pacify Duryodhana, Sakuni reiterates the power and luck of the Pandavas. Sakuni says: You must harbor no resentment against Yudhishthira, for the Pandavas have always enjoyed good luck. In the past you have often made attempts on them with many wiles, and the tiger like men escaped because of their luck. They won Draupadi for their wife, and Drupada with his sons for their ally, and the heroic Vasudeva for their helper in the winning of the earth. They won undiminished wealth as their father's portion, king of the earth, and it grew through their energy. Why lament about that?

Dhananjaya, by sating the Fire, won the bow Gandiva, the two inexhaustible quivers, and celestial weapons. With that superb bow and the might of his own arms he subjugated the kings—why lament about it? He freed the Danava Maya from the forest fire and had him build that hall—why lament about it?

(9)

The Pandavas lose the game of dice and Draupadi is presented in court,

[wikipedia.org]

Note that in the above passage Sakuni concedes that the Pandavas have displayed the will to work hard and tirelessly—they received their father's portion but with their contribution "it grew through their energy". This has brought them appreciation and wealth. Importantly, they have won all things mentioned by Sakuni with effort, including Draupadi—who is actually not a thing but a person.

However, Draupadi in the text is clubbed time and again with objects and things that can be either won or lost!

Sakuni's assessment of the Pandavas' has an opposite effect on Duryodhana as it further accentuates his suffering. The palace of illusion 'Maya' in fact becomes a source of yearning for Duryodhana. It sows the seeds of revenge in him. The palace of illusion reminds Duryodhana of his humiliation at 19



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Yudhisthira's palace at Indraprastha. The incident at the palace of 'Maya' where Duryodhana is mocked at by the Pandavas adds fuel to fire.

Vaisampayana narrates the episode thus:

Mighty Bhimasena saw him that way, as did Arjun and the twins, and they burst out laughing. A choleric man, he (Duryodhana) did not suffer their mockery; to save his face he did not look at them.

Once more he pulled up his robe, as though crossing a pool, to ascend firm land, again those people all laughed at him. He once tried a door, which appeared to be open, and hurt his forehead; and the next time, thinking the door was closed, he shrank from the doorway.

(7)

These incidents leave Duryodhana in a state of utter despair and he is driven to thoughts of suicide. Says Duryodhana to Sakuni—

When I saw all that blazing fortune at the Pandava's, I fell prey to resentment and I am burning, though that is not my way. I shall enter the fire, or drink poison, or drown myself, for I shall not be able to live.

Duryodhana attaches significance to the fact that the five brothers united with several kings who act as their allies are invincible. He on the other hand views himself as alone —

All alone I am not capable of acquiring such a regal fortune; nor do I see any allies, and therefore I think of death.

The thought of death comes easy to Duryodhana even when Sakuni is

quick to remind him of his own allies and wealth. The latter iterates : You say you have no allies, King Bharata; that is not true, for your war like brothers are your allies. So is the grand archer Drona and his sagacious son, and the Suta's son Radhey and the warrior Gautama. So am I with my brothers and the heroic Saumadatti and together with all of us you must conquer the entire world”

(9)

Duryodhana is barely convinced. You will notice that Duryodhana despairs because his own fame appears faded when compared to the dazzle of the court at Indraprastha. In itself, Duryodhana's wealth or power has not diminished.

While his rivals may have prospered Duryodhana has not met with any misfortune. It is only when he sees his own palace and kingdom in relative worth vis-à-vis the Pandavas that he becomes insecure and dejected. Thus, he asserts “what man like me who sees their sovereignty over earth, with such wealth and such a sacrifice, would not burn with fever? ” Still, his authority and power stands jeopardised in the face of an alternate centre of power, as he says “For what man of mettle in this world will have patience when he sees his rivals prosper and himself decline”? At the personal level, his life-long enmity with the Pandavas adds to his discomfiture; despite all his efforts to see their ruin he finds that they have emerged victorious and won many friends, favored by fortune as they were.

2.2.1 Sakuni's Reassurance and Conspiracy Duryodhana receives assurance from Sakuni but the latter also admits that

“Dhanamjaya, Vasudeva, Bhimsena, Yudhishthira, Nakula and Sahadeva and 20

the august Draupada cannot be defeated in battle by force, not even by



the hosts of the Gods. They are great warriors and archers, know their

“The Dicing” from the

weapons and are battle crazy”.

(9-10)

Book of the Assembly Hall

The Pandavas's invincibility is aptly highlighted by Sakuni. Even the gods he claims cannot defeat the Pandavas in battle. However, Duryodhana must find a way of submitting them to his authority. Sakuni suggests that the formidable group of Pandavas be defeated in gambling—that is the Achilles heel of Yudhishtira. Sakuni proclaims himself to be undefeatable in gambling as he suggests:

The kaunteya loves to gamble but does not know how to play. If the lordly king is challenged, he will not be able to resist. And I am a shrewd gambler. I don't have my match on earth or in all three worlds! Challenge the Kaunteya to a game of dice. With my skill with the dice, King, I am certain to take from him his kingdom and his radiant fortune, in your behalf, bull among men. Mention all this to the king, Duryodhana, and if your father permits, I shall certainly defeat him

(10).

Interestingly, what cannot be done on the field will be achieved on the table and by one who is far from a warrior. In the game of minds then valour plays little part. The Pandavas sure are not known for wit or cunning. They could neither deceive nor play with strategy. That was Sakuni's skill. Duryodhana too is rash and restless, known little for pragmatism or diplomacy. He is identified with valour as also ruthlessness. Here, however a different side of Duryodhana's character comes to the fore. He displays an inferiority complex and appears diffident as also self-conscious. These attributes go against his grain as it were.

Still, when Sakuni claims he can defeat the Pandavas in a game of dice, Duryodhana is thoughtful of his allies and friends as he says "if they (the Pandavas) can be defeated without inconsiderateness to our friends and other great-spirited allies, then tell me, uncle" (10). Duryodhana is cautious to not displease his allies and aware of the ties he must maintain with friends.

Further, when Sakuni urges Duryodhana to speak to the king about permitting a challenge of the dice, Duryodhana goes on a back foot and is hesitant to speak to his father. He contrarily persuades Sakuni to take the task of presenting the matter to the king in "the right way". See how he articulates his hesitation,

"No, you yourself must mention it in the right way to Dhrtarastra, the first

of the Kurus, O Saubala. I shall not be able to bring up the matter”

(10)

Why does Duryodhana feel incapacitated to speak to his father about permitting a game of Dice? Does he suspect it would betray his ill-intent? Contrarily, does Duryodhana’s conscience not allow him to justify his vicious plan? These questions surface in the reading of the text. In fact, we will note that such variations and doubts in the character of Duryodhana make him a more human and plausible character.

2.2.2 The Emotional Manipulation of Dhrtarastra

As we move further into the text we see Sakuni making a case for the game ceremony before Dhrtarastra dramatically. He exploits the king’s emotions by cashing in on the pain and suffering of Duryodhana who “looked pale and 21



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yellow and wan...and (is) brooding”. Dhrtarastra unable to understand the cause, asks Duryodhana:

I do not see a cause for your grief, for this grand sovereignty entirely devolves on you, son, and your brothers and friends do not do you ill. You wear fine clothes, you eat hash of meat, purebred horses carry you—why are you yellow and wan? Costly beds and charming women, well-appointed houses and all the recreation you want—all this waits on your word, without a doubt, as though on the words of Gods.

You are unassailable, yet seem sad? Why do you pine, my son?

(11)

Note how the wealth of the court is described as also the privileges the King enjoys—a pure breed horse to carry him and all kinds of recreation made available for him, including “charming women” who are clubbed with “costly beds” as if one is the extension of the other. That costly beds and charming women are spoken in one breadth tell us a lot about the place of women in that society where they were viewed as objects of possession and recreation.

This will inform us a great deal about the events that would unfold later in the episode when Draupadi is dragged into the court.

To return to the case of Duryodhana, we find that he doubts the power he wields. The Pandavas’ aura continues to haunt him as he tells Dhrtarastra,

“I eat and dress like any miserable man” and that “my pleasure no longer satisfies me, now that I have seen the radiant fortune at Yudhisthira Kaunteya’s, which causes my pallor” . Almost in a trance, Duryodhana seems to live the memory of his visit at Indraprastha. He savours the experience and describes what he saw (a second time) to Dhrtarastra who must imagine all that is being told to him— Duryodhana relives imaginatively the experience he narrates. Both go over in their minds the splendour of Indraprastha.

Duryodhana sets the scene and describes it vividly in the following manner: There are eighty-eight thousand snataka householders whom Yudhisthira supports, each of them with thirty slave girls. Ten thousand more eat daily the best food at Yudhisthira’s house from golden platters. The Kamboja send him hides of the kadall deer, black, dark, and red, and costly blankets, chariots, women, cows, horses by the hundreds and thousands, and three hundred times a hundred camel mares wander about there. The kings brought all manner of precious things to the son of Kunti at his superb ritual, O king, and in great plenty. Nowhere have I seen or heard of such an inflow of wealth as at the sacrifice of the sagacious son of Pandu! And as I have seen the limitless flood of wealth of my enemy, king, I find no shelter and brood incessantly, my lord.

(12)

Duryodhana’s description may be exaggerated and understandable as he, has been deeply influenced by the scene at Indraprastha. However, the exaggerated speech is also meant to persuade the blind Dhrtarastra who must make his judgement on the bases of what he hears. To add to the astonishment of Dhrtarastra, Duryodhana elaborates “And listen to me as I tell of a miracle there” and he continues with the saga till “it raised my hairs”. You will note that the evocative nature of Duryodhana’s speech

makes a compelling scene.

Dhrtarastra is almost convinced about the “sublime fortune” of the Pandavas.

22

Duryodhana through his description has justified his wish, in fact, the necessity



to take prompt action and gain supremacy over the Pandavas. He says “This

“The Dicing” from the

man knows the dice, King, and he is able to take the fortune of the Pandava

Book of the Assembly Hall

in a game. Pray allow it.”

(13)

Duryodhana who had earlier felt incapable of speaking the truth states it explicitly here. Dhrtarastra visibly moved but not yet vulnerable, decides to seek advice from “my wise councilor the Steward” who is “farsighted” and “will put first the Law and our ultimate benefit”. Note the difference between Duryodhana’s wish for instant gratification and Dhrtarastra’s emphasis on “ultimate benefit”.

The latter’s is an appeal for broader humanism while the former speaks of individual uplift. Here, it is the Steward who is seen as the pronouncer of truth and in whose judgment the king places his faith. However, the idea is nipped in the bud when Duryodhana intervenes and says “the Steward will turn you down, if he comes in on this”. Even Duryodhana is aware that from the point of view of justice and the state’s welfare (which the Steward represents) the act of challenging the Pandavas to a game of dice could cost them dear. Still, Duryodhana’s urgency of tone conveys to his father the turmoil brewing in his mind. He gives the king no time to think and in fact plays the part of the victim, manipulating his father’s emotions. He says,

... when you are turned down, lordly king, I shall kill myself! Let there be no doubt! When I am dead, be happy with your Vidura, king. Surely, you shall have the pleasure of all earth: why bother about me?

(13)

This reproach by Duryodhana moves the king whose affection gets the better of him as he acts contrary to his own wisdom. He orders the servants to have:

“the carpenters build me a big hall of a thousand pillars and a hundred doors, heart-fetching and beautiful, and do it at once! And when they have splattered it with gems and thrown out the dice everywhere, report to me quietly”

(13)

Once the orders are given, Dhrtarastra turns into a person of steely resolve.

He does not budge even when Vidura pleads with him to call the game off.

The King proclaims:

My decision shall not be circumvented, Vidura, I tell you! I deem it supreme destiny that makes this befall.

(13)

Note first that the King who was initially keen on taking Vidura's advice now turns it down. This is because Dhrtarastra here speaks in the capacity of a king—his language carries the mark of authority. This is not the self-conscious man who sought Vidura's advice in the privacy of his chambers. Secondly, Dhrtarastra seems to shift the onus of his decision on destiny entirely by suggesting that it is “supreme destiny that makes this befall”—where he as an individual is only a carrier of command not an active agent. The emphasis on destiny in the book is a significant motif that recurs time and again. Ironically however, Dhrtarastra while speaking to Vidura counters fate as well—

When I and the bull of the Bharatas Bhisma are near, no foul play ordained by fate can possibly occur.

As events in the book unfold it is revealed that, neither the King nor the supremo Bhisma can alter the course of events or keep in check the wrongdoing of 23



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Duryodhana. They become helpless “mute spectators when the Pandavas are insulted. Does this suggest that destiny played a part in seeing the ruin of the Bharata clan? We may explore this area further (Refer to the discussion on Fate in Unit 1). A quick glance at the role of fate will show

us how easily fortunes can be reversed I the blink of an eye. This we shall take up in the next section.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What do you think is the significance of the Palace of Illusion/ “Maya” Palace in the Mahabharata?

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.....

2) Is Duryodhana’s manipulation of his father Dhrtarastra effective?

.....

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2.3

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

We find that in the first half of the chapter ‘ The Dicing’, Duryodhana goes on narrating accounts of the vast influence and wealth of King Kaunteya (Yudhishthira), exemplified in instances such as the following—

“Chinese men I saw and Huns, Scythians, Orissans, the ones who live in the interior forest, Varneyas, Robber Huns, Black Folk and Himalayans—I cannot get over the many who came and were denied admission, yet paid tribute to him, of so many shapes and so numerous”

(17)

Such descriptions cover the first part of the book and paint for us a picture of exuberance, plenitude and luxury that belong to the Pandavas. This is the peak of power for the Pandavas.

The latter half of the chapter on the other hand reveals to us a complete reversal of fortune. From riches the Pandavas are reduced to slaves. The detailed descriptions provided by Duryodhana create a dramatic effect and against these the fall of the Pandavas appears more shocking. Also it is worth noting that Dhrtarastra calls this a “family game of dice” and as we

see later, the entire logic of a family game stands on its head. The ‘family’ game turns into a ‘fatal’

game as it augments the fight between the two warring groups, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Still, Janamajeya the eager listener of the tale, we note, is full of questions and earnestly urges the narrator of this section Vaisampayana to explain in detail the sequence around the dicing event which as Janamajaya suggests “was the root of the destruction of the world”. The reversal in the case of the Pandavas is complete when Yushisthira not only loses his riches, himself, his brothers and Draupadi as well. We will need to analyse the actual game of dice next.

2.4

THE GAME OF DICE

Yudhisthira is invited by Vidura to Dhrtarastra’s palace to “play and enjoy a family game” (28). Yudhisthira’s first reaction is, “At a dicing we surely
24

shall quarrel”. Vidura is quick to agree and proclaims “I know that the game



will bring disaster”. Interestingly, both Vidura and Yudhisthira, considered wise

“The Dicing” from the

men in the book, hold similar opinions on the consequence of the dice game.

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Yet, both agree to become part of it and not stall it. They are both bound by a sense of duty or Dharma towards King Dhrtarastra.

2.4.1 Yudhishthira's Dharma

Yudhishthira is acutely aware of the danger involved in playing the game of dice, as he suggest,

“most dangerous gamblers have been collected, who are sure to play with wizard tricks” and yet he adds “it is the King Dhrtarastra’s behest, so I will not refuse, sage, to go to the game. A son will always respect the father”

(29)

The reason for agreeing to the game has a moral provided to it —that a son should be ever-obedient.

2.4.2 Losing the Kingdom, Brothers and Self in Gambling *At the game, Yudhishthira loses everything bit by bit. It begins with his inexhaustible gold, “regal chariot”, a “thousand must elephants”, a “hundred thousand slave girls and male slaves”. He goes on to lose “myriads of chariots, carts and horses” along with “My city, my country, the wealth of all my people” till he is left with nothing but his brothers and wife. Then too he stakes and loses all including himself in the game. At each turn we are told “Sakuni decided, tricked and cried ‘Won’” (33). The Pandavas turns into the slaves of the Kauravas and this invites the wrath of the elders but no one dares to chide Duryodhana or put an end to the game. Even when Vidura tells Dhrtarastra*

This man (Duryodhana) drunk with playing dice, does not look about him, like the mead-drinker, and in starting a feud with great warriors he does not reckon his downfall

(36)

-

the King ignores his advice.

2.4.3 Losing Draupadi

At Sakuni’s insinuation

Yet there is your precious queen and one throw is yet unwon. Stake Krsna of Pancala, and win yourself back with her

Yudhisthira stakes her and loses the game. At this moment Dhrtarastra is

“exhilarated” than saddened while “Bhisma, Drona, Krpa and others broke out in sweat”. The King is thrilled by the Kauravas’ winning spree and is blinded by power like his son Duryodhana who with deep satisfaction orders his steward to bring Draupadi to the court—

The beloved wife whom the Pandavas honor, let her sweep the house and run on our errands—what a joy to watch—with the serving wretches!

(35)

Vidura again makes Duryodhana aware that

... the incredible happens through people like you, you don’t know it, nitwit, you are tied in a noose! You hang over a chasm and do not grasp it, you dumb deer to anger tigers!

25



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Constantly, Vidura underpins the fact that in the clash between the two groups

– the Kauravas and the Pandavas — the latter are far more powerful and that Duryodhana is a “dumb deer” before, the Pandavas who are described as “angry tigers”. Vidura we are told, is a wise sage who can see the future and thus, his words carry an air of ominous finality. He further asserts, For this to be sure spells the end of the Kurus, a grisly end, the perdition of all

(36)

However, Duryodhana maddened with rage and revenge instructs the steward to bring Draupadi to the court. The next section deals with the scene when Draupadi is dragged into the Assembly Hall where Yudhishthira is engaged in the fatal game of dice.

2.5 THE CASE OF DRAUPADI

It is worth noting that the assembly to which Draupadi is dragged is meant for men to engage in political activities as also entertainment. Both these spheres are exclusive to men. Here, women seldom enter. When Draupadi is brought to this space dominated entirely by men, she is the only woman in the hall with all men watching the show as it were. In her fiery speech, after attempt has been made to disrobe her, she claims,

What greater humiliation than that I, a woman of virtue and beauty, now must invade the men's hall? What is left of the law of the kings?

From of old, we have heard, they do not bring law-minded into their hall

(58)

This reveals to us her precarious position. She says as she is dragged in the court by Duhsasana,

... in the hall are men who have studied the books, all follow the rites and are like unto Indras. They are all my gurus or act for them: before their eyes I cannot stand thus

(50)

When the steward enters the chambers of Draupadi his bold words "to your chores I must lead you" irks and shocks her. She gives voice to her anger thus – "how dare you speak so, an usher, to me?" Next, she questions the judgement of Yudhishthira in "What son of a king would hazard his wife?"

Draupadi raises a significant question regarding Yudhishthira's right on her when he had lost himself. "Go to the game" she sends the steward back "and ask in the assembly 'Bharata, whom did you lose first, yourself or me?'" On Yudhishthira's word sent by a messenger, Draupadi comes to the hall,

... in her one garment knotted below, weeping and in her courses, she went to the hall, the Pancala princess and stood before her father-in-law

(37-8)

2.5.1 Humiliation of Draupadi

The scene where Draupadi is being dragged into the court by Duhsasana is appalling. Duhsasana speaks to her in a brazen manner thus: All right now, come Pancali, you're won!

Look upon Duryodhanas, without shame!

You shall now love the Kurus, long-lotus-eyed one, You've been won under law, come along to the hall!

(39)

26



The foul language of Duhsasana and Karna, the lewd gestures of Duryodhana

“The Dicing” from the

point towards the malice they bear towards Draupadi. When Draupadi tells

Book of the Assembly Hall

Duhsasana,

... it is now my month! This is my sole garment, man of slow wit,

- Duhsasana shrewdly puts in with authority –

Sure you be in your month, Yajnasena's daughter Or wear a lone cloth, or go without one!

You've been won at the game and been made a slave, and one lechers with slaves as the fancy befalls (50)

What is the significance of referring to Draupadi menstruating time and again in the scene? At one level it could have been used by the writer to evoke deeper sympathy for the woman and her plight, however, at another it signifies her reproductive worth as a woman. The entire discourse of woman as the

“jag- janani” (the giver of birth to the world) gets established here. The scene becomes more dramatic for this reason as the two attributes of woman as mother and slave get starkly presented here. The symbol of motherhood contrasts with the idea of the slave. Thus we find:

Duhsasana, stroking her, led her and brought her, That Krsna of deep black hair, to the hall,

As though unprotected amidst her protectors,

And tossed her as wind tosses a plantain tree.

(39)

Draupadi with “her hair disheveled, her half skirt drooping, shaken about by Duhsasana, ashamed and burning with indignation” is brought before the gathering of men. Continuing with Draupadi's humiliation, let us look at the questions she poses next.

2.5.2 The Legal Point and Draupadi's Questions *Draupadi poses two questions before the audience—one, whether Yudhisthira who has lost his freedom, by losing the game of dice, has, any moral or legal right to stake Draupadi. Duhsasana comments, “the King, son of Dharma, abides by the Law, and the Law is subtle, for the wise to find out” (50).*

The topic is again broached by Bhishma who has seen Draupadi brought in a pitiable state in the court. He says—

As the law is subtle, my dear, I fail

To resolve your riddle the proper way:

A man without property cannot stake another's—

But given that wives are the husband's chattels?

Yudhisthira may give up all earth

With her riches before he'd give up the truth.

The Pandava said, "I have been won"

Therefore I cannot resolve this doubt.

(51-2)

This riddle remains unresolved as none can say with certainty what the Law says in this case. However, Bhishma's statement "given that wives are the husband's chattels" speaks volume about the status of women in that age and the commonly held views on them. The statement reveals to us notions that were accepted as true and considered to be the 'given' in normative life. Karna in this scene too argues that "Draupadi is part of all he (Yudhisthira) owns"

and thus she has been won. Note how Draupadi is seen as an object here owned by the man or in her case men. Karna questions her character in suggesting that:

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Or if you think that it was against the law to bring her into the hall clad in one piece of clothing, listen to what I have to say in reply to that. The gods have laid down that a woman shall have one husband, scion of Kuru. She submits to many men and assuredly is a whore! Thus there is, I think, nothing strange about taking her into the hall, or to have her in one piece of clothing, or for that matter naked! She, the Pandavas' wealth, and the Pandavas themselves have all been won by Saubala here according the law.

(55)

Several points require notice here. One, that Draupadi has no right over her 'self' and that she is the Pandavas' possession. She is derecognised as a human being merely because she is a woman tied in matrimony. Two, aspersion is cast on Draupadi's character as Karna views her as a "whore" since she

"submits to many men" who may be her husband(s) by law. It is the female sexuality that is at target here. If Draupadi can be made available to five men why can't others in the gathering likewise 'enjoy' her?—this seems to be Karna's suggestion. She cannot be considered a respectful-virtuous woman because she exercises her right to be with several men. This makes her a "whore" in Karna's views and therefore, the men have all the right to bring her "for that matter naked" into the assembly hall. The point is taken forward and Duhsasana

... forcibly laid hold of Draupadi's robe, O king, and in the midst of the assembly began to undress her

(55)

The scene evokes both shock and pathos in the reader who connects with the misery of Draupadi. Note that the narrator's tone too is full of sorrow when he exclaims "O King" in the quote above. Whether the scene also becomes a form of titillation for the audience hearing the tale (first Janamajeya and then the ascetics) is an unexplored area.

*Draupadi is molested and disrobed before the assembly of men—all her gurus, sages or relatives-in-law—yet none put a stop to it. Does it depict their helplessness? Were they bound by the Law too? Were they too appalled to react? In any case the story reaches a point when human agency fails to resolve a quandary, stands incapacitated before the law. In such a scenario the epic turns to *dues ex machina*—divine intervention—that saves Draupadi from the trauma of being stripped naked in public. Her*

humiliation and suffering finds release in the 'godly' act —

But when her skirt was being stripped off, lord of the people, another similar skirt appeared every time. A terrible roar went up from all the kings, a shout of approval as they watched that greatest wonder on earth ... A pile of clothes was heaped up in the middle of the hall, when Duhsasana, tired and ashamed, at last desisted and sat down. The gods among men in the hall raised the hair-raising cry of "Fie!" as they watched the sons of Kunti.

(55-6)

Draupadi was thus, saved by the agency of god. However, the second question that Draupadi raises before the men in the assembly hall is of great significance.

She asks:

How can I, wife of the Pandus, sister of Dhirstadyumna Parsata and friend of Vasudeva, enter the hall of the Kings? Is the wife of the King Dharma whose birth marches his, a slave or free? Speak Kauravas. I shall abide by your answer. For this foul man, disgrace 28



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of the Kauravas, is molesting me, and I cannot bear it any longer.

"The Dicing" from the

(59)

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Draupadi's question is relevant in our times for it may be asked if a woman equal to a man becomes his possession in marriage that he can buy and sell or stake and lose? Was Draupadi Yudhisthira's to lose? Did he have that kind of right over her? Even Bhishma cannot answer her question. He says "I cannot answer the question decisively, because the matter is subtle and mysterious as well as grave". The complexity of Draupadi's question dawns on the people in the assembly as none can say that Yudhisthira owned her.

The issue is as tortuous in our context where patriarchy has a strong grip on social relations between men and women. Karna gives his view on the subject based on accepted knowledge system of the time: "there are three who own no property, a student, a slave, a dependent woman" (61). The point of significance here is the place women occupied in ancient literature—how they were looked at from male-centred viewpoint. This throws light on our ancient value system as well. In so far as Draupadi is concerned in this scene she voices her anger before the gathering thus:

I on whom the assembled kings set eye in the arena at my Bridegroom Choice, but never before or after, I am now brought into the hall!

...I whom the Pandavas did not suffer to be touched by the wind in my house before, they now allow to be touched by this miscreant.

The Kurus allow—methinks that time is out of joint—their innocent daughter and daughter-in-law to be molested!

(59)

Draupadi reveals to the gathered assembly the truth of their action, that they have been mute spectators and thus, accomplices in the violent treatment meted out to her. The Kurus and the sages she asserts, have failed to follow the law for they allowed her molestation. The significance of the speech should not be lost to us in our present context.

While Yudhisthira is troubled and confused, Bhima the "wolf-Belly" flies in rage at the entire act. He "looked and watched how she was dragged, in her courses, with upper cloth drooping, who so little deserved it, in desperate pain". Bhima, angry with his own brother Yudhisthira for staking Draupadi and using her as a pawn in the game, gives voice to his anger thus: There are a lot of whores in the country of gamblers, Yudhisthira, but

they never throw them, for they have pity Even for women of that stripe. The tribute that the king of the Kasis brought and all our vast wealth, the gems that the other Kings of the earth brought in, the mounts and prizes, the armor and weaponry, the kingdom, yourself and we have all been staked and lost to others. This I didn't mind much, for you are the master of all we possess. But you went too far, I think, when you staked Draupadi. She did not deserve this! After she had won Pandavas As a girl, she is now because of you plagued by Kauravas... (53) The angle of law is again brought to bear upon the events. In his anger, Bhima calls Duhsasana "mean and cruel" and threatens to burn off his arms at which point Arjuna reminds Bhima:

Never before have you said words like these, Bhimasena! Surely your respect for the law has been destroyed by our harsh enemies! Don't 29



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fall in with the enemy's plans, obey your highest law: no one may overreach his eldest brother by law. The king was challenged by his foes, and remembering the baronial law, he played at the enemy's wish. That is our great glory!" (53)

Clearly, Arjuna is more poised and detached than Bhima. For all his love for Draupadi, his sense of duty gets the better of him. It appears that the law in fact dehumanises him as he is unable to pledge support to his wife in this moment of crisis. Bhima alone speaks with passion. Again the question of law takes centre-stage. The baronial law of not refusing the enemy if challenged is being posed here to explain Yudhishthira's action.

2.5.3 The King's Offering of Three Boons to Draupadi

Finally, the scene is made more dramatic by the "horrible sound" of jackals, donkeys and grisly birds. The ghastly omens make Dhrtarastra

wary of the danger looming over the Kauravas. To settle the matter amicably, Dhrtarastra gives three boons to Draupadi. She asks for the freedom of Yudhisthira first and with the second boon she frees all her husband(s). The third boon she refuses to take saying that “my husbands... will find the good things, king, with their own good acts”. Draupadi is able to accomplish what none could.

She as Karna points out

has become the salvation of the Pandavas! When they were sinking, boatless and drowning, in the plumbless ocean, the Pancali became the Pandavas’ boat, to set them ashore

(65)

Thus, Draupadi ironically saves the Pandavas who were meant to save and protect her and who failed miserably at that. Nonetheless, Dhrtarastra gives back to the Pandavas all that they had lost in the game of dice and they leave for their home, Indraprastha.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Do you think it wrong of Yudhisthira to have staked Draupadi in the game of dice? Give a reasoned answer.

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2) Attempt a sketch of the position of women in the Mahabharata from your reading of *The Dicing*.

.....

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have covered the various facets of ‘The Dicing’ sequence which appears in the Book of The Assembly Hall. We have been able to locate clear indicators that led to the game of dicing. Specific motives of

Sakuni and Duryodhana to defeat the Pandavas also came to the fore. The unit has considered areas of fate and fortune governing the lives of individuals. The predicament of Draupadi has been extensively dealt with here. As we may 30

have noticed, the question of law receives focus in the discussion.



“The Dicing” from the

2.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Book of the Assembly Hall

Check Your Progress 1

1) Read Section 2.2 carefully and write the answer in your own words.

2) Read Section 2.2.2

Check Your Progress 2

1) Read Section 2.5

2) Read Section 2.4 and 2.5 and then organize your thoughts in your own words and write the answer.

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UNIT 3 THE SEQUEL TO THE

DICING: A READING

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Plot to Vanquish the Enemy

3.2.1 The Motif of a Father's Blind Love for his Son 3.3 The Importance of

Loyalty and Dharma

3.4 The Second Game of Dicing

3.5 Departure to the Forest

3.6 Let Us Sum Up

3.7 Questions

3.8 Hints to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint us with the compulsions of Dharma that made Yudhishthira return to the assembly hall. It will also introduce a seminal theme of the entire book—the King’s folly and his blind love for his son. This unit is meant to set the tone of war as well as its inevitability. In this sense, the “The Sequel to the Dicing” is an extension of “The Dicing” sequence. The objective of this unit is to help us trace the dramatic elements in the narrative that contribute to its epic nature.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit coheres well with the unit “The Dicing”. It begins with the Pandavas’

departure from Dhrtarastra’s court. We are told that soon after the Pandavas leave the assembly hall, Duryodhana begins to plot against them with Sakuni and Karna. He rushes to his father, King Dhrtarastra and urges him to call the Pandavas back. They, according to Duryodhana have left as wounded tigers and are sure to attack the Kauravas once they reach home. Following this, Duryodhana plots another game of dice through which the Pandavas will be exiled from their Kingdom. He reassures his father that Sakuni will win the game. This will be a foolproof plan to eliminate the Pandavas by sending them into the forest for thirteen years. Dhrtarastra half-scared, half-tempted consequently orders his usher to call the Pandavas back even if they are already on their way. The messenger reaches Yudhishthira who then decides to honour the word of the king. Yudhishthira is fully aware of the consequences of a second game.

He knows it will spell doom, and bring about war and destruction. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to obey the word of Dhrtarastra. Thus, the Pandavas, we are told, return to the hall that brings them humiliation. This hall depicts the wizardry of Sakuni and the misdemeanour of Duryodhana and Duhsasana.

In a single game of dice, the Pandavas again lose to Sakuni. They are bound by the logic of the game—the defeated group will go into the forest (basically be exiled), and live there for twelve years followed by another year in disguise.

If their identity is revealed in the thirteenth year, the cycle of the twelve year-exile would begin afresh. A simple game of dice reverses the fortunes of the Pandava brothers along with those of the many men and women of their 32



*kingdom. Finally, the Pandavas dress in clothes made of deerskin and proceed **The Sequel to the Dicing: A***

on their journey to the forest, having lost the second game of dice.

Reading

3.2 PLOT TO VANQUISH THE ENEMY

Envy coupled with fear seems to have assailed Duryodhana as the Pandavas proceed on their homeward journey. The Pandavas did not lose their wealth but had their honour and dignity greatly compromised. The “Sequel to Dicing”

begins at this point. Dhrtarastra believes that he is successful in controlling the situation at the dicing sequence. The damage done to the Pandavas by his sons is in his view reversed in the three boons he offers to Draupadi and returns the wealth of the Pandavas. However, Duryodhana creates fear in the mind of the King by suggesting that leaving the enemy wounded and not vanquished will be their biggest mistake and before the enemy can get back at them the Kauravas should strike first and win the battle. Duryodhana dramatically presents the anger and attitude of the Pandavas in such a way that Dhrtarastra is rattled and convinced of the Kauravas’ doom. The

question is—why does Duryodhana want to call the Pandavas back? Is he fearful of their revenge? He humiliated the Pandavas and will obviously be the target of their fury. Or is he using fear as a ploy to convince Dhrtarastra to let them play another game of dice as he bears malice against the Pandavas? We might find clues in Duryodhana's words to Dhrtarastra; Have you not heard king, what the learned priest of the Gods, Brhaspati, said when he propounded policy to Sakra? 'Enemy-killer, enemies must be cut down by any means before they, with war or force can do you evil!

With this, Duryodhana raises an alarm that the Pandavas have left swearing and challenging the Kauravas since

We have offended them and they will never forgive us: who among them could forgive the molestation of Draupadi?

(71)

It appears that Duryodhana is fearful of the end knowing the gravity of his actions. Therefore, he emphasises the pressing need for the Kauravas to protect themselves and to eliminate the enemy. Note how he creates panic in his father: Father, the Pandavas have grasped their swords, they have mounted their chariots, and they are enraged. In their fury they will annihilate us like poisonous snakes! Arjuna is going fully girt; uncovering his two great quivers, he keeps picking up his Gandiva and looks about him, panting heavily. The Wolf-Belly swiftly raises his heavy club, we hear, and is fast riding out on the chariot he has teamed.

(70)

We note urgency in Duryodhana's tone. He makes Dhrtarastra believe that the threat is real and that they have to tackle the enemies before they move out of their territory. Ironically, Duryodhana refers to the Pandavas as furious poisonous snakes out to annihilate the Kaurava clan. Duryodhana's narrative appears more real to Dhrtarastra mainly because it has visual descriptions of the Pandavas' behaviour and attitude. Add to this the fact that these projections are in reality Duryodhana's interpretation of the Pandavas' attitude as they leave the court. Do you think Duryodhana's account is truthful or is it a fabrication? In Duryodhana's narrative, the characters of Arjun a and Bhima are particularly highlighted for their strength and prowess among the five brothers 33



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who are “panting” and “fast riding” back home. Duryodhana elaborates how the Pandavas looked and what they did in the following manner: Nakula has taken his sword and his shield with the eight moons, and Sahadeva and the King have made their attitude clear with gestures. Mounted on their chariots that are equipped with all weapon gear, and whipping the chariot teams, they are rushing out to raise their army.

(70)

The final purpose of Duryodhana’s speech is to create a palpable picture of the Pandavas rushing out in anger to raise an army. It is in this context that Duryodhana brings up the main intent of his description—crushing the enemy before they raise their heads in revolt against the Kauravas. In the words of Duryodhana—

We must dice again with the Pandavas, bless you, to send them to the forest: so we shall be able to bring them in our power (71)

You will notice that the question of power and supremacy has come up again.

Duryodhana cannot rest easy till his opponents are wiped out so that he will be the sole heir to the entire kingdom. The threat of the Pandavas coming back to claim their right to the throne constantly worries Duryodhana. Further, all along he has been aware of the opinion of the elders in the family including his own parents who believe in the legitimacy of the Pandavas’ right to the throne. Note that the Pandavas never ask for their claim to the entire Kingdom and merely ask for the right to rule five villages. However, for Duryodhana the threat is real and imminent can take shape at any point in time.

Thus, he feels compelled to oust the Pandavas completely. He has a ready plan and he shares it with the King—

They or we, whoever it be that is defeated at the dicing, must go into the forest clad in deerskins for twelve years. The thirteenth year they should live disguised among people, and if they are found out, again go into the forest for another twelve years. We or they shall live there: so let the game go on

(70)

You will notice that Duryodhana's proposal is the result of the plot that he has thoroughly worked out with his accomplices Sakuni and Karna. He takes the final plea, before the king, of saving the kingdom –

We shall be firmly rooted in the kingdom as we embrace our allies and keep contented a vast, mettlesome and invincible army. If they survive the vow after thirteen years, we shall vanquish them (70)

Thus, Dhrtarastra believes he is saving the Kaurava clan and the kingdom in asking the Pandavas to return to his court. Contrarily, it can be argued that the king can see the doom in calling the Pandavas back and defeating them in a game of dice but still goes ahead with it for he cannot disappoint his son.

This brings to question the kind of love a parent or a father has for his son.

We shall look at Dhrtarashtra's love for Duryodhana next.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Why does Duryodhana plan to vanquish the Pandava brothers ?

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.....

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3.2.1 The Motif of a Father's Blind Love for his Son The Sequel to the Dicing: A

Reading

Dhrtarastra is sufficiently convinced by his son to hold another game of dice.

This is when all his kinsmen advised him not to hold another game—

Then Drona, Somadatta, and the warrior Bahlika, Vidura and Drona's son, and the mighty son of the commoner's wench and Samtanu's son, Bhurishravas, and the warlike ViKarna, all of them said: 'Don't dice' and 'Let there be peace'.

(71)

-

but Dhrtarastra ignores them. Even Gandhari cautions Dhrtarastra to not be impulsive and pay heed to reason. She urges him to lead his sons in the right direction, "lest, broken asunder, they abandon you". Is it Dhrtarastra's fear of being abandoned by Duryodhana that makes him act rashly? Or is it his fatalistic view of things that makes him see his decisions as predetermined?

Speaking to Gandhari, Dhrtarastra says "Surely if our line must end, I shall not be able to avert it" (72). Do you think Dhrtarastra could have averted the war if he took wise decisions? It appears difficult and problematic. On the other hand, Gandhari in the scene gives the impression of being more rational than her husband. She is not solely driven by love for Duryodhana and is rather governed by law or Dharma. As Vaisampayana says, "Gandhari tormented by grief because of her love for her son, yet yoked to

the law”

speaks to Dhrtarastra. In her speech Gandhari expresses her intuitive sense about things which as events unfold turn true. She speaks to Dhrtarastra thus: When Duryodhana was born, the wise Steward said, ‘It is better to send this defiler of his race to the next world!’ No sooner was he born than he howled like a jackal, Bharata! Take notice, Kurus! He will be the end of this house! Do not prefer the opinion of children who are untaught, Lord! Do not become the cause of the ghastly perdition of your line!

As is evident, Gandhari’s prudence contrasts sharply with the foolishness of Dhrtarastra. She is against taking into account the “opinion of children” that have remained “untaught” suggesting that Duryodhana has learnt nothing despite his education. This distinguishes Gandhari from Dhrtarastra who being King often shows lack of reason. Contrarily, in the epic she stands out as a thinking-rational woman who does not give in to her emotions. When Vaisampayana says,

At the behest of the wise king Dhrtarastra, an usher spoke to Yudhisthira,”

- we catch the irony of the adjective “wise” used for Dhrtarastra who acts imprudently throughout. What defines Dhrtarastra’s actions?

Vaisampayana gives the explanation by claiming that Dhrtarastra “made the challenge to the Pandavas, for he loved his son”

(71)

The Mahabharata is at a basic level the story about a father’s love for his son. Looked at from this angle, the epic appears to be a part of folklore. It can be read as the story of a single human emotion— a father’s excessive love for his son and the consequence of such a love that gives precedence to attachment over duty and law. However, the epic has many layers that add to its complexity. Despite its complex structure and nuances, the Mahabharata retains folklorist elements as well. This motif is carried to the end of the section with Dhrtarastra’s final comment —“Thus Sanjaya, did the Steward give his law-minded and apt advice; but I did not heed it, for I wanted to favour my son” (86). Let us now examine the importance of loyalty and dharma which seems to be the code of the age, in the next section.



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3.3

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOYALTY AND

DHARMA

Why did Yudhishthira agree to go back for the second game of dice when he knew well enough that he would lose against the trickery of Sakuni? Concepts of Dharma and loyalty play an important role here. Even as Yudhishthira is aware of the likely consequence, that, he will be offering a sacrifice of himself and his family, he still clearly ventures to stake all? It is his unwavering commitment to not disobey the king that he agrees to go back. As he says: It is at the disposing of the Placer that creatures find good or ill. There is no averting of either, if we must play again. Although I may know that the challenge of the dicing at the old man's behest will bring ruin, I cannot disobey his word.

Yudhishthira's words suggest a sense of inevitability of happenings. He has accorded it the will of God—"at the disposing of the Placer" i.e. human beings do good or ill. The fact that none can avert it has a sense of finality about it. His actions in this sense are driven by the idea of fate. The notion of Dharma attached to the idea of obeying the king is also at work here. As he says "How indeed could a king like me, who guards his own Law, fail to return when summoned?" (73). There is an assertion in Yudhishthira's phrase, "a king like me". It points towards Yudhishthira's essential character that is to unflinchingly abide by the law. It is his driving force and the reason for existence. In this sense, the character of Yudhishthira cannot go against the grain. Do you think Yudhishthira is free to make the choice of returning to his kingdom without accepting the proposal of the king? Can he leave without entertaining the usher?

Also, consider the question—Is Yudhisthira bound by law? The related idea of being bound by oath is another significant motif reiterated time and again in the narrative. Karna as we see in the unit on “Temptation of Karna” tells both Krsna and Kunti that he is bound by oath to remain loyal to Duryodhana.

Bhisma, too is, stuck by his oath of not marrying and not assuming kingship—

“for the sake of my father and family I swore a difficult oath,” says he,

“to be neither king nor father. And here I live confidently, keeping my promise” (107). Bhisma despite others compelling him in desperate situations to take the position of a king (“When Indra no longer rained on the kingless kingdom, the subjects hastened to me, driven by hunger and fear”) rejects the offer and keeps his promise—“The wailing of the subjects failed to shake my mind and recalling the code of the strict (adherence) I kept my promise”.

The oath taken then assumes a sacred attribute and characters are unswerving in their resolve in the Mahabharata. This discussion brings us to the second dicing game that takes places in the Mahabharata. We shall examine that quickly in the next section.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Compare the responses of Dhrtarastra and Gandhari towards Duryodhana’s wish to hold a second game of dice? Which one of the two do you find more rational?

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2) Discuss Yudhishthira's essential character trait. Why could he not disobey
The Sequel to the Dicing: A

the king?

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3.4 THE SECOND GAME OF DICING

In this case, we are told that the “great warriors” the Pandavas return to the hall that has brought them much ignominy. But they do so with poise and calm.

Vaisampayana begins recounting the tale thus—“They sat down at their ease to resume the dicing, crushed down by fate, for the destruction of the entire world”. Note how the range of the event gains almost cosmic proportions—

a small incident such as dicing relevant only to two concerned parties eventually engulfs the entire world in the wake of its destruction. The active agency of fate and the complete submission of human beings to it are reinforced here.

Had the Pandavas proactively intervened and refused to play the game, how would the events have unfolded? Would it have changed the future course of events?

wikipedia.org

Nonetheless, Yudhisthira “compelled by his shame and his love for law, again had to go to the game. Though he understood, wise as he was, he returned to the game worrying, ‘will it not spell the Kurus destruction? ”. The law again hinders free choice. We witness that Yudhisthira is worried about the destruction of the Kuru clan—destruction that would be caused by the game.

He accepts the challenge to stake his kingdom and comfort trading it off for exile in the forest for twelve years and a thirteenth in incognito. Having lost the game to Sakuni, the Pandavas set off on their exile to the wilderness.

At this moment, an exhilarated Duhsasana, we are told, cries out.

Now the wheel has begun of the great-spirited king, the son of Dhrtarastra! The sons of Pandu have been overcome...The Parthas have been thrown into hell, for a long time, an endless time, fallen from happiness, bereft of their kingdom, for years without end (74)

Duhsasana seems to believe in his victory and the Pandavas’ eternal state of despair. Duhsasana is shown breaking into the verse form to sing of the Kauravas’ triumph. He urges Draupadi to abandon the Pandavas and choose a man of wealth from the Kurus. To quote from the text: 37



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Having seen the fine-clad reduced to deerskins

And penniless, homeless, in the woods,

What joy shall you find, you Yajnaseni?

Now choose a husband who pleasures you!

For all the Kurus are here assembled

Forbearing and masterful and quite rich

Choose one of them to be your husband

This turn of the tide should not distress you.

(75)

Duhsasana's reference to Draupadi hints at his continued interest in her from the Dicing Scene. It was also a way of divesting the authority of the Pandavas vis-à-vis the woman they married. He further claims "Why wait on the Pandavas? They have fallen," and urges her to rethink by suggesting, "It is useless to wait for barren seeds". The Pandavas have been stripped of their powers. The metaphor of "barren barley" or "fruitless like barren sesame seeds" is used for them to indicate their impotency as males and by extension as owners of Kingdom and wealth. It is at this point when their manhood is challenged, that Bhima "the Himalayan lion" threatens the "jackal" Duhsasana with dire consequences. He says, "I shall make you remember" your words

"when I hurt yours in battle". However, Bhima fiercely angry "kept to his law". We are reminded time and again in the text that law/righteousness is

supreme to the Pandu brothers while their counterparts Duryodhana and his tribe work with cunning and deceit. Thus, Bhima claims “Abuse, rough and cruel is possible with you Duhsasana: for who else would dare to boast when he had won wealth with trickery?” This is followed by Bhima’s horrifying pledge –

... the Wolf-Belly son of Partha shall not go to the happy worlds, if he does not rip open your chest and drink your blood in war!

(76)

This sets the scene for the impending battle and fear increasingly grips the Kauravas. Bhima’s calamitous words speak of the disaster that is to come, as follows:

I shall kill Duryodhana, Arjuna shall kill Karna, and Sahadeva shall kill Sakuni, crook with the dice. And this grave word I shall once more solemnly utter in the middle of the hall—the Gods shall make it true when there will be war between us: I shall kill this Suyodhana with my club in the fight and I shall push his head into earth with my foot; and of this hero with words this harsh and evil Duhsasana, I shall drink the blood like a lion!

(77)

That war between the two groups would take place appears inevitable at this stage. Add to this the fact that Narada, the “greatest of divine seers”, appeared after the departure of the Pandavas and “stood before the Kurus; and amidst great seers he spoke this ghastly words: “Thirteen years from now the Kauravas who are here will perish, through Duryodhana’s guilt and Bhima’s and Arjuna’s might”. Having spoken thus, Narada disappears. This in a way, seals the fate of the Kauravas who have begun to believe in their might.

Duryodhana, Karna and Sakuni rush to Drona and offer “the kingdom to him”, thinking he might save them from peril. But Drona is aware of their fate.

He tells Duryodhana and the entire gathering that “the twice born have said that the Pandavas, who are sons of Gods cannot be killed (83)

Note that the Pandavas being sons of gods are immortals. In this sense they

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are human beings with the attributes of gods. But they are not ordinary human



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beings—in that, they have superpowers given to them by the gods. In a way, ***The Sequel to the Dicing: A***

the Pandavas are semi-god figures who are a blend of the human and the

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divine. They are humans because they are bound by earthly ties, (even Gods and Goddesses are known to be bound by earthly ties, don't you think?) and thus, project certain weaknesses. Emotions work on them and affect their behavior even as they are largely governed by Dharma and righteousness.

*In the context, the purpose of this narrative appears to be defining the good and bad in life and how they work in our midst. However, it is also about how to live one's life along codes of law and ethics—accordingly, **Vyas**, the writer of the epic suggests that the gods facilitate our living and rescue human beings in times of need. Thereafter, the second game of dicing that the Pandavas lose, they must go into exile. The next section examines their*

departure.

3.5 DEPARTURE TO THE FOREST

The Pandu brothers after having lost in the game of dice prepare for their journey to the forest to live as ordinary folks for a period of twelve years.

Vidura speaks to them before their departure and offers a view of their past which has been full of adventures and learning. We understand through Vidura's speech the versatile and adaptable nature of the Pandavas. He says, "Long before when you lived in the Himalayas, Savarin of Mount Meru instructed you. So did, in the town of Varnavata, Krsna Dvaipayana, so Rama on Bhrgu's Peak, and Sambhu by the river Drsadvati". First, we may note that Vidura emphasises the knowledge of the Pandavas that they had gained by living in diverse regions outside the Kingdom, away from the comforts of home—

something that Duryodhana and his brother never obtained. Knowledge, thus, comes to the Pandavas from different sources. Secondly, the Pandavas are being compared to Rama and Sambhu who, too, have similar experiences. That the Pandavas are equated with avatars of gods is a reiteration of their godliness.

Vidura adds "Near Anjana you have also listened to the great seer Asita, and your priest Dhaumya has steadily seen Narada lest you lose in the world-to-come this resolve that the seers honour".

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Note that the Pandavas's priest Dhaumya has been in constant touch with Narada who in turn has direct interaction with the gods. Together their task it appears is to ensure that the Pandavas continue to tread the path of

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righteousness and not err on the way. Certainly, these experiences add to the resilience and wisdom of the Pandavas. Vidura seems to be suggesting that moving out of the kingdom has always brought the Pandavas many boons and that the present exile will be an addition to their knowledge. He claims:

“Pandava, with this resolve you surpass Pururavas Aila, with your ability the other kings, with your obedience to the Law the seers”. Certainly, the constant movement of the Pandavas from one region to another would have made them alert to their surroundings. Their understanding and awareness will be strengthened and the complexities of situation will awaken their critical senses.

They will be more humanised in the process of living as ordinary folks in villages and forests. This may not have been possible had they had remained limited to their kingdom and looked at life from that vantage point. Calling these gifts that make a person, Vidura finally tells Yudhisthira: In the gift of yourself you are like the moon. Get your sustenance from water, forbearance from earth, all heat from the orb of the sun.

Know that your strength comes from the wind and your own origin springs from the elements

(79)

The suggestion here seems to be that staying close to nature would add harmony to their lives.

However, as the Pandavas depart for the forest they project their will and attitude dramatically which, stands in contrast to their actions. They submit to the authority of Dhrtarastra by returning and agreeing to play the game of dice; follow the law and take it seriously. When they lost the game, which they knew they would, they take the proposal seriously and venture to live in the forest for twelve plus one years. However, while they proceed with their onward journey they display their anger in various ways. Their demeanour is found to be far from submissive. This is described by Vidura to Dhrtarastra who is eager to know the response of the Pandavas after their lethal defeat at the game. Vidura tells Dhrtarastra the manner in which they leave for their exile: Kunti's son Yudhisthira has covered his face with his shawl, and Bhima Pandava has spread his arms wide as he goes. The left-handed archer follows the king, scattering sand, and Madri's son, Sahadeva goes with his face all streaked. Nakula is much

distressed in his thoughts and is walking with his whole body lined with dust, behind his king, he the handsomest man on earth. Krsna of long eyes, hiding her face in her hair, beautiful and crying much, follows the king. Dhaumya is chanting the gruesome Chants of Death, lord of the people, and as he walks the tracks he holds up kussa grass in his hand.

(81)

Dhrtarastra finds this manner of the Pandavas rather absurd and asks Vidura

“Why are they travelling in these strange ways?” Vidura has only described to Dhrtarastra the manner of their going. He now adds his interpretation to this description. This provides meaning to each action of the Pandavas which finally appears intimidating to the ever inconstant Dhrtarastra. Vidura does not shy away from criticising Dhrtarastra for his actions and lays the blame squarely on him by suggesting, “Even though with your deceitful connivance your sons took his riches and kingdom, the mind of the wise king Dharma does not stray away from Law” (82). Vidura tells Dhrtarastra that Yudhishthira,

“although consumed by fury over the trickery, refuses to cast his evil eye”

on Dhrtarastra s. “That is why the Pandava king goes with his eyes covered”

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as Yudhishthira had said “Lest I burn these folk down to the ground if I **The Sequel to the Dicing: A**

look at them with my evil eye”. Seldom do we ever find Yudhishthira speaking

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in this manner. Anger is not his characteristic trait. Here, however, he displays it on this occasion and in fact speaks of its intensity—that his glance is enough to burn the enemy down.

Vidura offers to explain Bhima's strange gait suggesting that he is aware of his great strength that equals none. To quote, "That is why he is going that way, with his arms extended wide, showing his arms, proud of the bulk of his arms, ready to employ them on his enemies". Note that Bhima is angry throughout in this scene but we are told that he remains within the bounds of law and does not try to circumvent it. He pledges to kill his enemy and shows his might here but does not use it on anyone.

Next, when Vidura describes the gestures of Arjun a, the dramatic effect of the scene gets further heightened. The metaphor of scattering sand enriches the meaning of such an act. We are told that in the act of departing, Arjun a is seen

... scattering about sand to forecast the number of enemies that will burn with his arrows. Just as his grains of sand are separated one another, as severally shall he loose on his enemies the showers of his arrows, Bharata

(82)

His actions appear as a prophecy ensuring the death of his enemies. Nakul and Sahadev, on the other hand, are covered with dust and streaks respectively projecting their rebellion and anger through the act.

Still, Draupadi is "dressed in her sole garment, disheveled and weeping in her courses, her cloth wet and besmirched with blood". Note that the Dicing Sequence has shown us Draupadi at her most vulnerable—dressed in a single cloth stained with blood. She has been successful in winning her five husbands back from King Dhrtarastra and is about to leave the city of Indraprastha when they are called back to the assembly hall. In that semi-clad state, she comes back to the place of her disgrace and once again in a final game of dice, loses the wealth that was initially restored to the Pandavas by the king.

Dressed in that same cloth she leaves for her exile. Thus, humiliation and rage makes Draupadi curse the family of the Kauravas in the following manner: They because of whom I got this way, thirteen years from now their wives will have their husbands dead, their sons dead, their kinsmen and friends dead! Their bodies smeared with the blood of their relatives, their hair loosened and themselves in their courses, the women shall offer up the water to the dead, no less, as the Pandavas enter the City of the

You must have noted that Draupadi's curse is meant for the women of the house of Dhrtarastra s. She refers to the wives of the Dhrtarastra s who will see their husbands' dead and mothers who will see their sons' dead. There is a shift in foci as Draupadi speaks of the suffering of women in battles. The scope of personal rivalries becomes broadened to include friends and kinsmen; wives and children. Draupadi's references are to women whose bodies will be smeared with the blood of their loved ones. Her blood stained clothes become symbolic of the blood that will be smeared on the clothes of the Kaurava women when the Pandavas return from exile. She specifically refers to those 41



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women 'being in their courses' and offering "water to the dead". Note the irony here. 'Being in their courses' signifies fertility and reproduction which is a celebration of life. But Draupadi suggests that they will in such a time be offering prayers to the dead. Draupadi's pivotal presence in this scene broadens the scene of animosity which is no more limited to rivalry between the two sets of brothers but confrontation and destruction of an entire clan and a civilisation.

Vidura's final comments on Dhaumya, (the family priest of the Pandavas), creates a dramatic scene as Dhaumya has "fashioned the kusa grass that is dedicated to Nirrti and leads their procession, chanting the chants that are devoted to Yama". The reverberating atmosphere created by the chants to death makes a terrifying scene for the beholder, as is evident from Dhaumya's declaration "When the Bharatas have been killed in the war the gurus of the Kurus shall likewise sing these Chants!" Certainly this episode shows in detail the procession of the Pandavas and like any procession it

carries its share of spectacle and drama. The narrative evokes both awe and fear. It is equally worth noting that as the Pandavas leave the place

... on all sides the anguished town people are crying, 'O Woe! Our protectors are leaving! Look at this calamity!

(83)

Interestingly, the populace of the town is on the side of the Pandavas. The common people show faith in the Pandavas and bemoan their departure. In fact, they consider the Pandavas their protectors and thus, in a way negate the authority of Dhrtarastra who rules the kingdom. The cry of the common people is accompanied by the fury of nature that, seems to react to the injustice meted out to the Pandavas.

As Vidura tells Dhrtarastra "When these superior men in this fashion departed from the City of Elephant, lighting flashed on the cloudless sky and the earth trembled". We are made to understand that nature too rebels against this act and joins the Pandavas in their fight. Vidura goes on to add,

"Rahu swallowed the sun when no eclipse was due" and "meteors exploded widdershins". This fosters the idea that sending the Pandavas away was no less than a natural calamity. Also, it leads to chaos and misrule even in the domain of the gods. It makes the beasts even angrier. To quote, "Beasts of prey roared forth with vultures, jackals, and crows around the temples and sanctuaries of gods and the watch towers of the palaces". This signifies ill omen and grave consequences. Vidura thus, speaks of the various portents that loom large over the future of the Kauravas who are well on their path to destructions..

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the following: one, the motives behind Duryodhana's appeal to call the Pandavas back for a second game of dice; two, Dhrtarastra's weaknesses and his blind love for his son that makes him act impulsively; three, Yudhisthira's state of mind in accepting the proposal of the king. We have also critically identified the difference between description and its interpretation, the way it was offered first by Duryodhana to Dhrtarastra and later by Vidura to Dhrtarastra. We have looked at the individual aspect that each Pandava carries with him/ her, while heading to the forest. The unit has highlighted the dramatic quality of this section of the epic that makes it 42

cosmic in proportions.



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3.7 QUESTIONS

Reading

1) What is the significance of the Pandavas' gestures as they left for exile in to the forest?

2) Comment on the importance of the law and individual's free choice in the Mahabharata.

3.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Refer to Section 3.2

Check Your Progress 2

1) Refer to Sections 3.2 and 3.2.1

2) Refer to Section 3.3



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Vyas: Mahabharata

UNIT 4 THE TEMPTATION OF KARNA

FROM THE UDYOG PARVA

Structure

4.0

Objectives

4.1

Introduction

4.2

Understanding the Character of Karna

4.3

The Predicament of Karna — Temptation

4.3.1

Conversation with Krsna

4.3.2

Karna's response to Krsna

4.3.3

Karna's Dream

4.3.4

Kunti and Karna

4.4

Class differences: the Suta and the Kshatriya 4.5

Strategy in War

4.6

A Series of Narratives

4.6.1

The narratives of Bhishma and Drona

4.6.2

The narratives of Vidura, Gandhari and Dhrtarastra 4.7

Let Us Sum Up

Questions

Hints to Check Your Progress

4.10 Glossary

4.11 Suggested Readings & References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with the character of Karna and his specific predicament in the text when Kṛṣṇa reveals to him the secret of his birth and parentage. Karna is Pandu's son—(Kunti's son to be precise), that she bears before she marries Pandu, a son from the Sun god as a result of a boon.

Kṛṣṇa makes a proposal to Karna that should he join the Pandavas in the war against the Kauravas he will bestow on him the title of King. Since he is the first born, he will be recognised by everyone as the rightful heir. This is exactly what Karna has been wishing for all his life—his claim as a Kṣatriya and his rightful place in the power structure. With one stroke he would get both if he agrees to Kṛṣṇa. It is this bind that Karna is caught in that gets revealed in this episode of Book 5 (55) of the Mahabharata. Would Karna agree? Would he be foolish if he didn't? What stops him from fulfilling his dreams? These and related questions will be explored in this unit. The objective of this unit is to help us unravel the psychological state of Karna and the social environment that he inhabits. It will also help us appreciate the motives that govern various characters in this section of the epic better.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us try to categorise the different events that take place in this chapter (55) of Udyog Parva (Book 5) of the Mahabharata. The play of narrative within narrative is also to be witnessed here. To begin with, Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Sanjaya to tell him what Kṛṣṇa has told Karna. Sanjaya narrates the entire conversation 44



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that takes place between Krsna and Karna where the former reveals the true Kshatriya identity of Karna. Krsna tries to persuade Karna to join the Pandavas, his brothers in the war against the Kauravas. He offers Karna the throne and the powers that come with the king with his five brothers standing in attendance. Karna refuses the tempting offer, his life's dream, claiming his loyalty to Duryodhana. He then narrates an ominous dream that portends the fall of Duryodhana and the rise of the Pandavas. He projects this war as a grand sacrifice where the unjust Kauravas are bound to be annihilated and he along with them. All this is narrated by Sanjaya to Dhrtarastra who is eager to know Karna's stance. Remember, Sanjaya has the gift of sight, the power to see everything even where he is not present. He, therefore, becomes indispensable to the blind Dhrtarastra from this book onwards as the latter keeps urging Sanjaya to tell him about each event as it takes place.

Following the long conversation between Krsna and Karna, we move to the short Vidura- Kunti episode where the former expresses his grief over the imminent family war. To control the situation, Kunti goes to meet Karna on the bank of the river Ganges where the two have a candid conversation and she reveals the truth of his (Karna's) birth. She, too, attempts to persuade Karna to join his brothers in war and this is coupled with the voice of the Sun-god who advises Karna to pay heed to his mother's offer. However, Karna is insistent. He offers Kunti some respite by promising to kill Arjun only in war and not touch Kunti's other sons so that they would always remain five in number. With this, we move to the next episode in this section.

Here, Krsna returns to Upaplavya, the city where the Panadavas are camped, and holds counsel with Yudhisthira. On Yudhisthira's request, Krsna tells him what he sees at the court of Duryodhana. First, he narrates the long speech of Bhisma, followed by Drona's compelling argument about kingship and war.

This is followed by the speeches of Vidura, Gandhari and Dhrtarastra. All of them narrate the history of the clan only to bring it to bear upon Duryodhana that the Kingdom justly belongs to the Pandavas and that the war would bring disaster. Krsna narrates to Yudhishthira that Duryodhana remained adamant and hence he returned, finally suggesting that the war was inevitable and that preparations for it should begin. As Krsna claims—

Now I see no other course open but the fourth—punishment. The kings are marching to Kurukshetra to their doom!

(113)

4.2 UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER OF

KARNA

Even since his first appearance on the scene, Karna has wished to prove his valour. To achieve this, he challenges Arjun and lets him know that he is equally brave and skillful as a warrior. He grapples with the question of his birth and origin. The awareness that he was born Kshatriya but denied the rights and privileges that came with it makes him bitter and angry—as Karna says “born a Ksatriya I have yet not received the respect due a baron. What enemy could have done me greater harm than you (Kunti) have? ” That he may be the illegitimate child of a Kshatriya adds fuel to the fire; this makes him anxious about his parentage. He has never been claimed a son by any of the Kshatriyas, and this continues to haunt him. **Irawati Karve** has suggested that Karna “had acquired the skills of the Kshatriyas but he could not master their 45



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value-frame”. The code of conduct followed by the Kshatriya is not ingrained in Karna. **Karve** has observed:

To be rash was a Kshatriya characteristic but the unwritten rule that one must never be small-minded was broken often by Karna... (126) It is this that makes Bhishma, and then Drona comment that Karna falls short of being the ideal warrior for lack of sound judgment. From the beginning of the epic, Karna has been described as significant to Duryodhana's plan of ousting and killing the Pandavas. Ugrasravas the poet, the actual narrator of the Mahabharata has this to say of their relationship—

Duryodhana is a great tree, filled with resentment, Karna is the trunk (1.1.65)

The two are portrayed as inseparable and yet, Karna in his words projects a sense of the right and wrong. He is aware of the wrong path he has chosen and continues to tread on it unlike Duryodhana who is blinded by power and full of conceit. Let's look at the temptation of Karna next.

4.3 THE PREDICAMENT OF KARNA -

TEMPTATION

In the narrative Dhritarashtra asks Sanjaya to narrate to him the conversation that takes place between Krsna and Karna, after Krsna asks the latter to mount the chariot. Sanjaya tells him that the words that Krsna spoke to mighty Karna are both pleasant and in conformity with the Dharma. And then he goes on to narrate the conversation between the two. Krsna praises Karna for being knowledgeable about the truth, the dharma and the sacred teachings of the Vedas. And then he reveals that Karna was born to Kunti before her marriage to Pandu, and thus according to dharma, he then is the son of Pandu.

After revealing the truth about his birth, Krsna then tries to tempt Karna with all kinds of favours and comforts and luxuries that he will enjoy if he so chooses to side with the Pandavas. Krsna tells him that if he comes with him, he will become the King, and that the Pandavas will recognise him as the eldest brother, for he was born even before Yudhishtira. Krsna then tells him that all those who have gathered to fight in favour of the Pandavas, including the Pandavas and their sons, will bow down to him, and also that he will be able to approach Draupadi with her own willingness.

Krsna tells Karna that the latter will have the assistance of the Pandavas, the five sons of Kunti, the Panchalas, and the Chedis, and Krsna himself will instate him as the king and ruler of the earth. He finally asks the mighty warrior to change sides so that he can enjoy the fruits of the kingdom along with his brothers, i.e. Pandavas. Krsna tells Karna that he

needs to make a choice immediately as he must establish the blood line between him and his Pandavas brothers. In this manner Krsna keeps tempting Karna. We shall examine the conversation with Krsna in detail in the next section.

4.3.1 Conversation with Krsna

Having asked Karna to mount his chariot, Krsna begins to unveil a seminal truth about the former's life. He draws on the scriptures to suggest that a son born to a woman before marriage stands to claim his right as a legitimate son 46

and “You Karna were born that way; under law you are the son of Pandu.



*Under the constraint of the book of law, come with me and you shall **The Temptation of Karna***

*be king” . This is a moment of great testing for Karna. He has been waiting **from the Udyog Parva***

all his life to lay claim to his Kshatriya lineage. Now, when it is offered to him and along with the opportunity to be king, he has to make the tough choice.

Krsna tempts him by presenting a visual picture of his would-be kingship—

“The five Pandavas shall clasp your feet as your brothers and so shall the five sons of Draupadi and the unvanquished son of Subhadra” (92).

Krsna is aware that nothing would please Karna better than to see the Pandavas at his feet and himself as the unchallenged king. Krsna further draws a picture of wealth and plenitude that would be on offer if Karna decides to join the Pandavas—“Baronesses and daughters of kings shall

bring golden, silver, and earthen vessels, herbs, all seeds, all gems, and shrubs for your imagination. And at the sixth turn you shall lie with Draupadi”. This is meant to further lure Karna so he may lose his rigid stance and give in to the pleasures offered by Krsna. His unfulfilled desires are consciously stoked here. Despite his valour and strength Karna never received recognition from the Brahmins and was always looked down upon for belonging to the class of Sutas. Krsna plays upon this bitterness in Karna by suggesting that if he agreed,

Today Brahmins representing all four Vedas shall consecrate you, assisted by the very priest of the Pandavas, while you are seated on the tiger skin

(93)

He also exploits Karna’s hatred for Arjun as he appeases him by suggesting, “Arjun shall drive the chariot drawn by his white horses”. Karna’s response to Krsna is very interesting as we shall see in the next section.

4.3.2 Karna’s Response to Krsna

Instead, Karna shares his negative feelings with Krsna by claiming, “Yes Krsna, under law I was born the son of Pandu. But Kunti cast me out as though I had been stillborn! ” The pain attached to being discarded at birth is palpable in Karna’s speech. He recounts how Adhiratha, the Suta, carried him home with love to Radha and “out of love for me the milk of Radha’s breasts poured forth at once and she accepted my piss and shit, Madhava! How could a man like me deny her the ancestral offering?” (93). It is this obligation that Karna finds difficult to turn away from. Also, it is meant to depict the contrast between Kunti, a mother who left him at the mercy of fate and another, Radha, who accepted him with love. The foster parents gave him a Suta identity when he had none and now when his Kshatriya identity has finally emerged, it would be an act of betrayal to forsake his Suta identity and accept the new one. As Karna says “Adhiratha, the Suta, thinks of me as his son, and my love demands that I think of him as my father”. Clearly Karna emphasises here his responsibility to think of Adhiratha as his father. His Dharma and his love both demand of him to accept his Suta identity. Karna also suggests that one cannot be uprooted from a social class and planted in another. His family life and bonds of love are within the social system he had inhabited. It is this that makes him say—

He had my birth rites performed, Madhava, by the rules found in scriptures, out of love for his son, Janardana. He had the Brahmins name me Vasusena. And when I was old enough, he married me to wives,

Kesava. I have sons and grandsons by them, Janardana, and my heart has bonds of love with them, Krsna.

(93)

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Karna goes on to rationalise the other relationship he has built over the years with Duryodhana who, too, has showered him with favours and has found in him a friend. As Karna claims “For thirteen years I have enjoyed unrivaled royal power in Dhrtarastra’s lineage by relying on Duryodhana” and that

“Duryodhana has raised arms and prepared for war with the Pandavas, because he relies on me”. It is this that makes Karna reject Krsna’s proposal.

Interestingly, Karna refuses to accept Krsna’s enticing offer because of the debt he carries towards his foster parents and his friend /benefactor Duryodhana.

He owes them this debt and it drives him to sacrifice himself at the altar of loyalty. As he states—“Govinda, neither joy nor fear nor all the earth nor piles of gold can make me a traitor to my word” (93). Nevertheless, Karna is aware of the impending doom of Duryodhana and is certain of his own downfall and death along with him. As he claims:

The total destruction that looms for the earth is caused by Sakuni, me, Duhsasana, and Dhrtarastra’s son King Duryodhana. There is no doubt, Krsna, that a great battle impends between the Pandavas and Kurus, grisly and mired in blood. The kings and princes who follow Duryodhana’s orders

will journey to Yama's realm, burned by the fire of the weapons in the war.

(98)

In such a case, it appears strange that he doesn't join the Pandavas. Karna sacrifices the promised life he has been dreaming of. Is it loyalty for Duryodhana alone or is it Dharma, the law that is stopping him from accepting Krsna's offer? Karna also claims that accepting the offer would amount to cowardice.

Karna is aware that the Pandavas have been in the right and are considerate of the law while the Kauravas have been on the side of Adharma. Why does he then follow ideas of loyalty with the unlawful lot? Could it be that Karna thinks himself to be irredeemable, suggesting that he has fallen to such an extent that he can't retrieve himself? He, thus, enters the war to sacrifice himself and purge himself of the sins committed—he tells Krsna at the end of their rendezvous

"We shall meet again next (in heaven), prince sans blame" signifying that in heaven he would be worthy of an alliance with Krsna while in the present situation he has committed many a wrong. Krsna's words leave him more despondent and brooding and yet he continues to follow the path taken earlier.

Can we say that if Karna agreed to join the Pandavas, he would have been instrumental in saving the Kauravas from the war? Without Karna on his side Duryodhana would feel too weak to put up a battle. Why else would Krsna call Karna to his chariot? Krsna called Karna and none else because he wished to avert the war. It was not love for Karna nor that he doubted the Pandavas'

victory in war. Can we then say that, it is Karna's decision that leads them all to battle? Importantly, is Karna aware of the significant role he plays at this juncture in the text? Is he deliberately pushing for war—as if to meet death and to take the Kauravas to their rightful end, that is death? Is he following another kind of Dharma where the wrong must be punished, even when he is on the side of wrong and in rejecting Krsna he is actually following the right path? These questions come to mind as we see how Karna argues with Krsna about right and wrong— Dharma and Adharma. For instance, he says—

Varsneya, the Dhrtarastra will hold a grand sacrifice of war. Of this sacrifice you shall be the witness, Janardana and you shall be the Adhvaryu priest at the ritual ... The insults I heaped on the Pandavas, to please Duryodhana, those I regret. When you see me cut down by the left-

handed Archer, it will be the Re-piling of the fire of their sacrifice. When the Pandava drinks 48

the blood of Duhsasana, bellowing his roar, it will be the Soma draught.



When the two Pancalyas fell Drona and Bhishma, that will be the conclusion
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of the sacrifice, Janardana. When the mighty Bhimsena kills Duryodhana,
from the Udyog Parva

then the great sacrifice of the Dhartarastra will end (95-6).

Karna's decision determines the further course of action in the text. On the surface it appears to be an individual's choice. However, this decision of the individual has far reaching consequences. Karna as you recall from your reading of the text, also has a dream that needs to be discussed next.

4.3.3 Karna's Dream

Speaking of Karna's dream you will note that it carries "portentous signs"

that "foredoom great danger" for him and his allies. Karna narrates the picturesque dream he has to Krsna in which he says "I saw Yudhisthira and his brothers ascend to a thousand-pillared palace" wearing "white turbans and white robes" and "they all had beautiful stools". The grandeur of the palace here is heightened by the exaggeration that a dream easily facilitates.

Also in the dream the Pandavas are wearing white robes and turbans that give them an ethereal quality. Still, white is also the colour of harmony, peace and justice signifying that a new order has been set up. Next, Karna says to Krsna,

... In my vision I saw you drape the blood-fouled earth with entrails, Krsna Janardana. A boundless august Yudhisthira mounted a pile of bones and joyously ate rice mixed with ghee from a gold platter.

In both scenes described here there is reference to violence and death. While Krsna is an active agent here, bringing justice by destroying the “fouled” earth; Yudhisthira on the other hand is seen climbing a “pile of bones” to enjoy abundant food. A new era is being ushered in, as Karna notes: I saw Yudhisthira swallow the earth which you had served him—

clearly he shall enjoy the rule of the earth.

Note that Karna seems to have already accepted defeat at this point, (even before entering the battlefield) in acknowledging the might of Krsna and the integrity of Yudhisthira. He goes on to narrate the dream further—

Wolf-Belly of the terrible feats had climbed a steep mountain and with his club in hand the tiger-like man seemed to survey this earth—clearly he shall destroy us all in a great battle.

Note that Karna is describing his dream but alongside is, also offering an interpretation of it. Bhima surveying the earth from atop a mountain suggests to Karna his invincibility. On his side, Karna is certain that Bhima will destroy all his opponents including him. He also talks of the triumph of law and justice when he claims—

I know, Hrsikesa, that where there is Law there is triumph. Dhanamjaya carrying Gandiva had mounted a white elephant, together with you, Hrsikesa, blazing with sublime luster. All of you shall—about that I have no doubts—slaughter all the kings led by Duryodhana in battle, Krsna.

Is it the law (Dharma) as Karna says that makes him certain of the “slaughter of all kings led by Duryodhana” or the might of the Pandava brothers and their allies or for that matter, is it the colossal figure of Krsna that daunts Karna making him believe the defeat of Duryodhana inevitable? Karna’s dream gives us some clue. It appears that according to Karna the support of Krsna for the Pandavas is the decisive point in the battle. Interestingly, Krsna too thinks 49



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that Karna is the vital support for Duryodhana and without his presence, Duryodhana would not enter the battlefield. Karna describes all the men he sees in his dream. While Nakul, Sehdeva and Satyaki are decked with pure bracelets, wearing white garlands and robes, Dhrtarastra's army has red turbans except the three white turbaned men— Aswathaman, Krpa and Krtavarman Satvata. Finally, Karna ends his dream with the inexorable force of fortune, as he says—

Mounted on a camel cart, O strong-armed Janardana, Bhishma and Drona accompanied by me and Dhartarastra traveled to the region ruled by Agastya, Lord Janardana: soon we shall reach the dwelling of Yama; I and the other kings and the circle of barons shall doubtless enter the fire of Gandiva.

(100)

The finality in Karna's voice speaks of his belief that he would lose the war and his life. This further confirms that Karna willingly chooses death over life and kingdom. The dream in this sense is significant as it makes us privy to the working of the mind of Karna. This adds another dimension to his character which is to be understood in its complexity and subtlety. Besides Krsna, Kunti too tries to persuade Karna to switch sides and join his real brothers the Pandavas. Let's look at the exchange between Kunti and Karna next.

It is interesting because Kunti reaches out to him as a mother, knowing that she had abandoned him at birth.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Why did Krsna tempt Karna to join the Pandavas? Was it for the well-

being of Karna or the Pandavas or the entire social system of the time?

Explain.

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4.3.4 Kunti and Karna

*As the narrative evolves, Kunti exhorts Karna to follow his Dharma and take up his Kshatriya identity. She tries to persuade him, reminding him of his duty as the first born Pandu. As **Kevin McGrath** notes in his essay *Speaking of Truth*—As usual in the Mahabharata, it is the royal women who are the ones to be cognizant in detail and eloquent in expression when matters of kingship arise. They function in the poem as a true mirror of princes.*

(213)

McGrath further asserts:

Women in epic Mahabharata more than male heroes speak what is considered to be social truth: what is right for ksatriyas and what constitutes good behaviour. They are satyavadini ‘speakers of truth’

or dharmacarini ‘one whose conduct is dharmic’. Usually such speeches are made when crisis is occurring and right demeanour is in question: then, a woman will speak, clarifying the situation and exhorting a hero or king who is not acting correctly and without due regard to ksatriyas dharma.

(187)

Note how Kunti embarks upon her task by telling Karna what is right and wrong for him:

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He the God who makes light and spreads heat, he Virocana begot



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*you on me, Karna, to be the greatest swordsmen. The child of a god, **The Temptation of Karna***

with inborn earrings and armor, you were borne by me in my father's

from the Udyog Parva

house, covered with glory, invincible son. It is not at all right for you, son, innocently to serve the Dhartarastras without knowing your real brothers.

(103)

Here, Kunti argues for the right path that Karna should take now that he is aware of his Ksatriya parentage and not follow the wrong “innocently”.

Karna's parentage has always been a burning issue in his life and now that it has come to light, he is unwilling to accept it. Kunti is both dramatic and eloquent in her persuasions and goes on to urge Karna to imagine what life would be if he joined his Pandava brothers. Much like Krsna, she paints the grand picture before Karna—

Surrounded by your five brothers, you shall surely shine forth Karna, like Brahma surrounded by the Vedas and their Branches. Endowed with virtues, the eldest and the best among relations who are the best, your title will no longer be that of a son of Suta, you shall be a heroic Partha

(103)

Still, we may note that in the interaction between Kunti and Karna, Kunti describes her young days to Karna when she was both a woman and child suggesting that she was doubly gullible, innocent and curious as a young person and open to danger as a girl. She wished to try the strength and power of a boon she received from a saint and in doing so obtained Karna from the Sun-god.

Another interesting aspect of this section is the direct intervention of the gods.

Krsna taken as god in human form is intervening to prevent war. Additionally, the sun-god talks directly to Karna corroborating Kunti's tale and urging Karna to join the Pandavas and relinquish the side of Duryodhana. The gods thus, negotiate with humans and strive to change the course of events but in vain.

Karna would not be moved to cowardice. Instead, he lets others know that he is bound by oath. In the next section we shall look at the class difference between the Sutas who were his foster parents and the Kshatriyas who were his real family.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Analyse the Character of Kunti as an independent assertive woman who was once a curious devoted girl too.

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4.4 CLASS DIFFERENCES: THE SUTA AND

THE KSHATRIYA

Even when it appears that Karna is fighting an individual battle, he is always reminded of the class he belongs to. Each time he is reminded of hierarchies that exist in society. At the time when he challenges Arjuna to a duel which is a desperate measure to display and prove his prowess, he is rebuffed by Krpa who asks him to hold a whip that is becoming of his caste and not a sword. Karna avows his fidelity to Duryodhana, and the latter rewards him by presenting him the kingdom of Anga. However, Karna is not presented with a marriage alliance with a Kshatriya. In fact, Karna claims that he and 51



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his sons have married into the Suta class— “I have offered much and often, but always with Sutas. I have performed domestic and marital rites, but always with Sutas. ” (93) Divisions of caste and class in the society of the time appear strict and fossilised and are not easy to break. At the time of the war, Shalya refuses to become a charioteer for Karna who is a Suta. These instances tell us about the strict boundaries of class and caste at the time. In this sense, Karna seems to be fighting for himself and his rights but at a deeper level he is fighting for the entire class that makes the art of war the exclusive rights of the upper class—the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. This strict categorisation denies rights to Sutas and the trader class. The case of Eklavya too comes to mind who, was physically wrenched away from the bow by extracting the sacrifice of his thumb. The inevitable war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas is the main theme in this unit. It is but pertinent that we look at the strategy in war next.

4.5 STRATEGY IN WAR

Note that the larger question involved in this episode is that of war. The section begins with the blind Dhrtarastra immensely curious to know what transpires between Krsna and Karna. He urges Sanjaya to tell him what Krsna said to Karna. Note the urgency in his tone when he piles question upon question: What did that slayer of enemy heroes (Krsna) say to Radheya inside the chariot, what blandishments did Govinda offer the Suta's son?

Relate to me what Krsna, with his voice roaring like a flood or a cloud, said to Karna, whether gently or sharply?

(92)

It is but obvious that, for the king, the implication would be far and deep.

The choice Karna makes at this point would decisively change the power dynamics between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Thus, the King of the Kauravas would be apprehensive about Krsna's smooth ways of appealing to the people. His interest in what Krsna tells Karna is politically important for it would determine the strength of the Kauravas.

Krsna doesn't tell the truth to Karna as an act of sheer good will. He wishes to turn the tide entirely in favour of the Pandavas. It may be said that Krsna knows the future and thus, wishes Karna to protect himself and attain his just position. However, Krsna in the text is known equally if not more for strategy than fair-play. In the given scenario he would do well to have a mighty warrior on the side of the Pandavas. Karna himself claims that it is only with his support that Duryodhana has ventured to go to war with the Pandavas. Another strategy adopted by Krsna is to intimidate the enemy so as to demoralise and weaken the enemy in mind by emphasising the powers of the Pandavas. He tells Karna –

There is no shadow of doubt remaining that victory's sure of the Pandavas: the Pandava's banner of Triumph is out, the terrible king of the apes has been raised

(97)

and

When you see the man of the white horses on the battlefield with Krsna driving his chariot, employing the missiles of Indra, Fire and Wind, and hear the whip-crack of Gandiva as of a thunderbolt, then there will be no more Krta Age, no more Treta, no more Dvarpara.

Krsna goes on repeating the last phrase so that it appears as an echo and
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a reaffirmation of the proximity of doomsday. Strategy, however, is not limited



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to the sphere of men. Kunti decides to meet Karna and soften him with her
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truth. Karna is well aware that it is self-interest that has made Kunti come
from the Udyog Parva

to him. It is not the genuine love of a mother for her first born son. Karna
retorts at her pleadings by claiming that:

*When there was time to act you did not show me your present compassion.
And now you have laid orders on me, the son to whom you denied the
sacraments. You have never acted in my interest like a mother, and now,
here you are, enlightening me solely in your own interest.*

(103)

Kunti like Krsna depicts a brilliant scene of kingship for Karna but he
remains obdurate. However, she is able to extract a promise from Karna
that includes the protection of her four sons except Arjun. The
Mahabharata as we know is a long narrative with many little narratives in
between. The entire narrative and sequence of events that leads to the war,
the preparation for the war are all but narratives. Hence, a look at the
series of narratives next.

4.6 A SERIES OF NARRATIVES

Yudhishtira asks an important question to Krsna: What did you tell the
son of Dhrtarastra in the assembly hall, lotus-eyed one, when you had gone
to the city of the Elephant? Please repeat it to me

Krsna narrates the entire episode. Note that the narrative technique in the
epic is based on “repetition”. Characters keep retelling events whether it is
Vaisampayana, the overall narrator of the epic or Sanjay for a brief period

or in this case Krsna. Along with repetition, stories are provided within a story.

For instance, Krsna narrates his story and repeats what he has said at the court of Dhrtarastra but also recounts the story told by Bhishma and by Drona of the clan—hence, story within a story. In Krsna's narration we find separate narratives for Bhishma, Drona as also Vidura, Gandhari and Dhrtarastra persuading Duryodhana to give up war and share the realm with his cousin brothers.

In this sense, if we trace the progression of the narrative we will find that Sanjaya becomes the first narrator in this section who tells Dhrtarastra what has ensued between Krsna and Karna. Then Vaisampayana assumes the role of narrator to describe the conversation between Vidura and Kunti followed by the scene between Kunti and Karna. Vaisampayana tells us next what Krsna and the Pandavas discuss. From this point on, Krsna assumes the role of narrator who tells Yudhishtira what has transpired at the court of the Kauravas. Krsna opens space for the narratives of Bhishma, and of Drona followed by those of Vidura, Gandhari and Dhrtarastra. And the section ends with Krsna's closing lines:

They will not give you the kingdom without war, Pandava. Driven to destroy, they now face death.

(113)

This is the entire narrative sequence of this section which is both intertwined and complex.

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4.6.1 The Narratives of Bhishma and Drona

*It becomes clear through the ancestral tales narrated by both Bhishma and Drona that Kingship is not the right of the first born but of a deserving person. These narratives of Bhishma and Drona are important for the reason that they recount the history of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. They recount the past as it took place to provide the young King Duryodhana a clear understanding and perspective on issues of family and kinship. Bhishma speaks of his father King Santanu, and delineates the family tree. He speaks of the time when the kingdom was Kingless and Bhishma had to maintain his oath and yet protect the lineage of the family. All along the epic, one finds that Bhishma's *raison d'être* has been the furthering and sustaining of the Kuru dynasty and for this he is often seen to go to any limit. Each time the family rule is in jeopardy, Bhishma finds ways to overcome it. For this reason, he brings the hermit Vyasa (the author of the epic) to his brother's wives and "propitiated the seer and solicited him for offspring and he bestowed his grace and begot three sons". Bhishma continues his narrative, "Being blind and thus lacking the faculty of sight, your father could not be King and Pandu great spirited and world renowned became King. He was the King and his sons are their father's heirs". The story is meant to highlight the right of the Pandu brothers to the kingdom.*

However, it also charts the process of succession and problems of continuing the dominance of the family in a kingdom. Bhishma tries to convince Duryodhana because he wishes to protect the family line and believes that a war would destroy the lineage.

The narrative of Drona continues the saga where Bhishma leaves it. He speaks of Pandu's law-spirited good judgement in having established the rule leaves the "lion throne" for the blind Dhrtarastra and the younger Vidura and goes to the forest himself. Drona questions Duryodhana's actions juxtaposing them with those of his forefathers who share and sacrifice to maintain the unity of the family. He retorts: "Why do you (Duryodhana) though born in the family, resolve to break up the family?" Finally Drona asserts his affiliation before lords and kings by claiming "Where Bhishma goes, goes Drona". This also speaks of the loyalty Drona bears towards Bhishma, the man, and not the kingdom.

His final words reinstate the basic motif of the epic—"Victory lies where law lies".

4.6.2 The Narratives of Vidura, Gandhari and Dhrtarastra

In the narrative, Vidura has been most vociferous in his critique of

Duryodhana.

Calling a spade a spade, Vidura blatantly describes the cruelty and arrogance of Duryodhana. Note how he speaks to Bhishma: Devavrata, listen to what I have to say. This dynasty of Kuru was lost and you rescued it—now you pay no heed to my complaints. Who is this defiler of his family, this Duryodhana, that you follow the judgement of this man who is possessed with greed, ignoble, ungrateful, his mind diseased with avarice, disobedient to the commandments of his father, who sees Law and Profit? The Kurus are doomed because of Duryodhana: act, great king, so that they need not perish. (109)

Vidura speaks of the impending destruction of the Kuru clan and considers Duryodhana “diseased” in mind. Vidura’s speech instills fear in the heart of Gandhari who unequivocally chides her son—“how dare you aspire in your

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folly to kingship, Duryodhana?” Gandhari, like Kunti makes an assertive
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statement about “The law” and its finality—“The Realm of the Kurus is ruled

from the Udyog Parva

by succession: that’s the family law come down to us”, asserting that we must follow it. She is the upholder of the law as well as its custodian. Finally, Dhrtarastra speaks his mind. Krsna narrates what Dhrtarastra tells Duryodhana—he enlightens his son about the dynastic history of Soma Prajapati who was the founder of the Kuru dynasty. Dhrtarastra describes the story of Nahusa’s son Yayati who was “the sixth from Soma”. Yayati Nahusa had five sons, Yadu was the eldest and Puru was the youngest.

Dhrtarastra narrates the story thus—

... befuddled by his pride in his strength” Yadu “grew mighty on four cornered earth and after subjugating the kings dwelled in the City of the Elephants.

He “did not abide by his father’s command” and as a result his father Yayati Nahusa in “fury cursed his son” and “cast him out of the kingdom” along with his other sons who followed him. He then “installed his youngest son Puru who took his orders obediently”. This story told by Dhrtarastra is meant to act as a check on Duryodhana who has been defiant and disobedient towards his elders. Dhrtarastra closes it with the statement: Thus even an eldest son is not born to kingship, if he is prideful (112)

Check Your Progress 3

1)

Write a note on the narrative technique employed in this section of the Mahabharata.

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

The unit has taken up in detail each aspect of the section in the course to explore dimensions that may be less visible in the first reading. This section is primarily about Karna. At the same time though, it opens up several other layers of the text which include—caste/class hierarchies; gender stereotypes; loyalty and obligation; Dharma and Adharma; family dynasty and its struggle for dominion; bonds of love and kinship; destiny and predetermination among others. The text moves in several directions and takes into account the opinions of different characters, such as Krsna, Kunti, Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and Dhrtarastra and, indeed primarily of Karna. The vast scope of the narrative widens our understanding of the world of the text and it gets altered as new narratives emerge in the process of movement.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1) Does Karna believe in the cause of Duryodhana? If not, then why does he continue his alliance with him? Elaborate.



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4.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Refer to Section 4.3, 4.3.1

Check Your Progress 2

1) Refer to Section 4.3.4

Check Your Progress 3

1) Refer to Section 4.6.1 & 4.6.2

4.10

GLOSSARY

Dharma and Adharma – (Sanskrit) the moral and the immoral; the pious and the profane; the lawful and unlawful.

Raison d'être – (French word) The most important reason for one's existence; 4.11

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3SUDRAKA: Mrichchhakatika

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

*Mrichchhakatika is a unique Sanskrit play as it deals with a totally fictional creation unlike the earlier play – Abhijnana Shakuntalam by **Kalidasa**. If we recall the previous block, we'd remember that this was one of the earliest plays to be translated and that it is based on the epic, the Mahabharata.*

*Mrichchhakatika also seems to flout the norms of the Natyashastra in not dealing with the lives of exalted beings. Moreover, it is interspersed with the vernacular also known as Prakrit. The Mrichchhakatika has been translated, adapted and performed globally and is a significant aspect of our ancient literary tradition. You are required to read *The Mrichchhakatika of Sudraka*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 2017 edition, translated by **M R Kale**, for this block.*

Good Luck with your work!



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Sudraka:

Mrichchhakatika



UNIT 1

SUDRAKA AND HIS PLAY

MRICHCHHKATIKA: AN

INTRODUCTION

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1.0

OBJECTIVES

*In this unit, we shall be considering questions and issues related to **Sudraka**'s famous play **Mrichchhkatika**, a drama text that belongs to the beginning years of the first millennium. Keeping this in view, we shall focus upon the conditions that prevailed in that distant past and the way they were recreated in the imaginative-cultural mode by its writer. Even as this play presumably entertained the audiences of its time, it has a good dose of humour and suspense. It holds an interest for us today as well. Also, a discussion about the characters in it and the conditions that surround them is sure to help us in understanding our own social atmosphere. As a work of art, this play will reflect on other plays of its period, and the others that followed it. The problems depicted in it and the creative-aesthetic experiments its writer made while developing his scope will, offer valuable insights into the complexities we confront in our own time.*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us first think of the important dates in relation to the writer **Sudraka** and the play. Let us admit, we face specific difficulties in this regard. It will be useful to keep in mind that the period to which the writer belongs is ancient India that, being far back in time is not easy to decipher. Particularly, in the case of literary texts of that period, determining the dates is a big issue. Either records were not kept, or they were lost in the long span of time between then and now. Yet, in the last two hundred years, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, efforts have been made to retrieve the precious treasures of ancient writing. Owing to this, a big chunk of valuable information is available today to tell us where we stood then with respect to economy, polity and social environment.

Further, we may get to know, how we might relate to this knowledge today in the middle of contemporary conflicts and issues. Literature has this dimension of the human experience, in it, there are elements that do not remain confined to interests and issues of the time when a literary text was composed. There is no doubt that predominant features of a text are taken from its period, yet, 5



Sudraka:

human beings in their practices show aspects that are rooted in the recent and

Mrichchhakatika

distant past as well as those others which are present in seed form and for this reason may come up in future, again in the coming few decades or much later.

Add to this the fact that social institutions, too, have a long life. They do

not have a fixed date on which they were born, so to say. Moreover, their life-span may be relatively larger than the period in which they perform a tangible and broadly determining function. Such institutions play the role of reminding succeeding eras of a history that shows itself at the level of presenting a process like the one that is set in motion in relatively different backgrounds. Be that as it may, ancient texts do arouse interest in us and take us to scenes of life capable of shedding light on what we do and the way we respond to our world.

Let us take the case of **Sudraka's** *Mrichchhakatika*. It is heard that the play was not known till its text emerged in remote Kerala in the early years of the twentieth century. At the same time though, there are bits of information about the play having been translated into a number of European languages in the latter half of the nineteenth century itself. It is possible that the Orientalists dug out the play from the vast repertoire of ancient writing in India and saw in it an outstanding dramatic composition. The emergence of the play's text from different sources in a diversity of places only added to its appeal. It also helped scholars compare one version of the text with another.

As soon as the play *Mrichchhakatika* came to light, it took the literary world by storm. Here is a play that is so relevant to our own time! It had an extremely evolved style of depiction, a dramatic form marked by consistency, wit, and objectivity. It offered a vast panorama of the ways of the time. As one went through the text, one was transported to the ancient era. In some respect, it resembled our own period. At the same time, in other respects it bore testimony to the world that produced it. The specificity of that world captured graphically in the play dazzled all. Having said that, let us now look at **Sudraka** the playwright.

1.2 SUDRAKA, THE PLAYWRIGHT

Sudraka, the playwright of *Mrichchhakatika*, lived at some point of time between the first and third century A.D. The name of the writer raises the question of whether he belonged to the marginalised sections of our society. Mark the word

'**Sudraka**' and consider. There may be some connection between the name of the playwright and his background that tells us the story of his antecedents and source. Contrarily or otherwise, the range and depth of the play suggest that he had a powerful literary imagination and was well acquainted with Sanskrit writings of his period, apart from being well-versed in the rich learning that ancient writing is known for.

A look at the text of the play makes clear that **Sudraka** expressed himself

with equal felicity in Sanskrit prose and verse as well as in Prakrit. The latter was a dialect used by the common masses of the time. In **Sudraka's** hands, Prakrit became an efficient medium of communication and did justice to the complex thought processes of the semiliterate and illiterate. Since the dialect was closer to life's rhythms, it left a peculiar impact on the reader and viewer then. Today as well, it might strike us for its flow and flexibility. Its raw nature moved the reader/viewer immensely. In its time, the play's dialect helped the 6



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audience connect with those characters that belonged to the street and learnt **Sudrakha and His Play**

their linguistic skills from there. Is it not fascinating that what you see in life

Mrichchhakatika: An

Introduction

is presented on the stage as part of a tale, an episode, and an interesting sequence? Prakrit with its rich vocabulary of the dialect, the play packed with actions, gestures and stances of the characters did in a manner, what the fully evolved Sanskrit was not perhaps capable of doing. Sanskrit is driven by brevity, suggestion and focus. On the other hand, Prakrit draws strength from the actual usage, and, the putting together of the two in the play works wonders for the depth of communication.

There exist numerous references to **Sudraka** in writings of the ancient period.

The man is remembered as a great ruler, a fine statesman, a scholar and thinker of repute, and one who knew many languages. These references turn him into a mythical figure. In view of the information we have, we may be tempted to guess whether he indeed was the writer of the play *Mrichchhkatika* that has a wide range of imagination and a close view of life at the grassroots. It is hard to surmise, for instance, that a king, howsoever knowledgeable, would be steeped in the nuances of feelings the play offers in its descriptions. It is possible that another person bearing the name **Sudraka** wrote this play and those many other plays that find mention in stray records of the period when he lived. This other **Sudraka** would have culled details of the plot and the happenings woven in it from his own sources of information and knowledge.

Also, it is not necessary that an unknown figure in that period bore the name **Sudraka** that suggested origins of the man in the lower orders of society. It is possible that the writer of the play *Mrichchhkatika* thought of hiding behind an assumed name **Sudraka**.

wikipedia.org

1.3 THE PLAY MRICHCHHKATIKA:

REFLECTING PERIOD OF COMPOSITION

Let us ask this question and see where it might lead us. Is it not an interesting fact that **Sudraka**'s *Mrichchhkatika* gives a truly realistic picture of ancient India? This is an India full of energy, passion, street-smart people crowding 7



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Sudraka:

the roads, quarrels and fights among the mighty and influential? In this we come

Mrichchhakatika

*across, too, the economic, political, crass as well as violent and scandalous facets of life—all thriving on what transpired really at the time. Historical accounts of the period may give us an inkling of this. Related to developments in the early centuries of the first millennium, read the following account by **D N Jha**: Increased commercial activity and the consequent growth of a money economy led to the proliferation of arts and crafts. ... The increase in trade demanded an efficient organization of production and distribution. Individual artisans congregated together and formed guilds; merchants also organized themselves into corporations. No less than two dozen guilds of artisans existed in this period. The guild system seems to have become the general pattern of production, facilitating high output. ... The guilds sometimes acted as trustees and bankers. ... The guilds evidently utilized the capital deposited with them to augment production and paid interest on it of the proceeds from the sale of their commodities. The possibility of the increasing output may have prompted the guilds to hire additional labour, both free labour and slaves. This naturally gave a measure of freedom to artisans and craftsmen. (134-135)*

***Jha** talks of an India active and vibrant. The increased economic activity created a platform for people to relate to one another on a plane of useful give and take. Commerce helped them increase the scope of their living beyond the narrow confines of a country market to one that, offered opportunities of expansion.*

As a consequence of this, preoccupations multiplied giving a chance to actors in the scene for tricks and innovative methods; these would enhance

*the quality of life stretching it beyond limits of sanctioned freedom.
“Augmented production”*

and interest being paid on “proceeds for sale” indicate higher levels of participation in the entrepreneurial world of ancient India.

***Jha** has stated in the quotation that “Increased commercial activity and the consequent growth of a money economy led to the proliferation of arts and crafts.” He has provided a link between activity in society and art. You know that Literature is also placed in the category of art. Do you agree with **Jha** regarding this link? If you do, you would have the idea that ancient Literature drew useful influences from the life of the times. Also, if the prevailing life had a strong economic activity working in it, the Literature of the period will also carry an impact of that activity in it. You may, then, see **Sudraka**’s *Mrichchhkatika* in a new light. Let us examine the impact of the prevailing economic condition on the literary writings of the period next.*

1.4

IMPACT OF MATERIAL SITUATIONS ON

LITERARY WRITING

Let us further extend the point raised in the previous section in our discussion.

*In view of the quotation given above on the economic scene, we may think of the issue of fantasy working on a writer’s mind. Such a fantasy indeed exists in *Mrichchhkatika* where the writer **Sudraka** uses, under an aesthetic plan, many variations of human response to the world around it. One may go over, in one’s imagination, the happenings in the play. For instance, a woman is being stalked by a group of evil souls driven by lust. The reader/viewer might study the vocabulary they employ to give vent to their hidden desires. At this point 8*



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*it is important to note that the scoundrels in pursuit of Vasantasena have thrown **Sudrakha and His Play***

caution to the winds and decided to capture and molest the woman if they

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Introduction

get their hands on her. They do not seem to be afraid of the legal machinery active in the town. The crime they intend to commit may land them in jail, but they seem not bothered by such an apprehension. Can we visualise such a situation in view of the account we have read in the quotation given above?

*The question entails a peculiar linkage between society and art. **Sudraka** has in mind, a town with an active administration, a powerful section of the rich and privileged, as well as a whole group of officers who on the sly will violate the existing norms and rules. The point is that a situation such as this might give an occasion to clever manipulators for seeking pleasures of the senses.*

Yet, the scene we talk about captures more than a legally permissible scenario.

It presents in tangible ways the clash between civilised norms and baser motives of men away from the light of law and constitution. The fight is between morality supported by ideals and pleasure-seeking by a pack of law-breakers. What should art do in such a case? Such a consideration works behind the structure of the play.

Mrichchhakatika may give the impression of being a comic play meant to offer titillation alone. Nothing is farther from the truth. In fact, there is no titillation in the scene referred to. Instead, a serious anomaly of social behaviour connected to a ruling clique in the town is being shown graphically. We may understand this point in precise terms when we compare the concerned scene with the dramatic happenings that unfold before us as the action proceeds. The range of action in the play is wide and it draws attention to those ethical questions as well as the connected issues of goodness and idealism that make a society meaningful in its dynamic working. There is no anarchy in the play. Even as recklessness may be spotted in a part of the social fabric, most of the people in the town and outside seek guidance from principles of virtue and social harmony. The binding thread for such a visualisation is provided by that productivity that operates at the centre of the socio - economic activity. We may get a glimpse of it when we take cognisance of a greater arrangement inherent in the historical framework of the play. Let us explore this idea further in the next section.

IN MRICHCHHAKATIKA

Another statement, this time from the historian **Irfan Habib**, provides further details about life in the period of history we are dealing with. It may take us into the domain and help us grasp the nature of the play *Mrichchhakatika* we are discussing. The statement goes as follows:

Every town that contained non-agricultural populations had to obtain food-stuffs for consumption and raw material for manufacture from the countryside. Insofar as the state or landed aristocracy living in towns collected taxes or rents from villages, whether in money or in kind, and spent the resources so gathered in the towns, the local trade was in one direction, i.e., from villages to towns. Villages sold grains in order to pay tax or rent in money, or gave over part of the produce to the tax or rent collector. In either case, a large part of the products was sold and consumed in the towns. Such trade 9



Sudraka:

is often called induced trade. Villages themselves depended on the

Mrichchhakatika

towns for very little, their 'imports' comprising some iron tools or salt (then an expensive commodity in some parts of the country).

But in some rural areas there were specialized crops or products, notably varieties of cotton, sugarcane or indigo, pepper, wild silks, etc., which had markets beyond the neighbouring towns.

The information given by **Habib** is linked largely to the differences in activities between the villages and the cities. This is denoted by “non-agricultural populations.” These are the ones that we come across in urban centres. People in the towns and cities live away from agriculture and are engaged in trade, administration, running of families, and interacting with one another at the level of thought that may revolve around education centres. Were there education centres in ancient India? Think of this and locate people in *Mrichchhkatika* taking seriously to reading, discussing and studying. When you do this, you might find certain people leaving the city and moving elsewhere or at least from one part of the city to another. In a broader sense, this may be characterised as social mobility. Do you recognise such a social mobility in the play? In the quotation above, there is a reference to trade, commodity and crops yielding cotton, sugarcane, indigo, pepper, wild silks, etc. Parallel to this, see if the play gives us a glimpses of the traders, merchants, buyers, those levying taxes, etc.

The place captured in *Mrichchhakatika* resembles the towns that still exist in modern India. Compare as well as contrast the two pictures and draw your own conclusions in this regard.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Do you think that an ancient text such as *Mrichchhakatika* is relevant to us? Give reasons to support your answer.

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.....

2) Can there be a link between the conditions of life in the society around us and the art of the same period? Attempt an answer to this question keeping in view Sudraka’s *Mrichchhkatika*.

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1.6 FOCUS ON MRICHCHHAKATIKA AS A LITERARY TEXT

Let us now look at Mrichchhakatika as a drama text which has characters bound in situations and which move from the beginning to the end in a sequence.

In Indian poetics of the ancient period, there used to be rules governing literary forms. One interesting rule was that of emotion, such as love, disgust, anger, laughter, etc. In many plays, we mainly come across the emotion of laughter or comedy. It is observed that laughter renders the description enjoyable and earthly. At the same time, it trivialises life's content, making it available to the crude and vulgar. From there, profane is not far.

10



*We generally note that the mighty gods to whom ordinary mortals look up do **Sudrakha and His Play***

not seek amusement but a meaningful message alone. The guiding principle in

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Introduction

Mrichchhakatika is the comic approach. It holds the main function of art to be entertaining, and letting people know that society, howsoever difficult and complex, is manageable.

It dawns on us that the issue in *Mrichchhakatika* is a crisis that shows itself in the situation of the protagonist. He is rendered poor by circumstances. Yet, the value of high drama in which kings, gods, and mythical figures are predominant is not assigned to *Mrichchhakatika*. It is not a *nataka* or *natakriyakriti* in that sense. *Nataka* denotes representation of the sacred and godly in a form that indicates the lofty and profound, not the ordinary. Instead, the name given to *Mrichchhakatika* is *Prakarana*. If politics and courtly issues involving change of order, lofty questions of war and preserving large territories were at the centre of the work, the play may have enjoyed a higher reputation than it has. What we find instead is that an ordinary scholar rendered poor by fate, or worldly shuffles of events is emotionally supported by a courtesan.

The two indeed are lovers, each holding the other in high regard and earning on that account adulation from the middle rung citizens in the society of the town. We may, therefore, accept the word *Prakarana* for it that may stand as explained in terms of a supposedly lesser play.

Biswanath Banerjee defines the word as follows:

This work of *Shudraka* is a *prakarana* type of dramatic composition which presents the love-episode of *Charudatta*, a poor but noble Brahmin tradesman of *Ujjayini*, and *Vasantasena*, a rich and attractive courtesan of the same place, which ends in their happy union. The main theme of the play has been furnished with various impressive and attractive incidents and actions to make the work of *Shudraka* the most enjoyable one in the whole range of Sanskrit dramatic literature.

(15)

The *prakarana* form is defined further by **Banerjee** thus: The primary condition of a *parkarana* to which class this drama belongs, is that it should be a drama of invention, i.e., the plot should be an invention of the poet, *kavi-kalpita*, based on worldly life focusing on the actions of men and women. In this respect *Shudraka*'s drama fulfils the condition of *dramaturgy* quite well, and even goes beyond it to be considered as the only drama of invention. As are the requirements of the type of composition the main theme has been presented in ten acts, the

predominant sentiment (*rasa*) is love or *shringara*, a deep and calm (*dhir-prashanta*) Brahmin is the hero, of the two heroines, one, i.e., *Dhuta*, is born of a noble family, *kulaja*, and the other, *Vasantasena*, is a public woman or *ganika*, and this makes the composition a mixed or *samkirna* type of *prakarana*.

(16)

At the same time, the play has characters who are weak yet ambitious individuals.

They are driven by the urge to succeed and wield power in their world. It does not matter whether they adopt fair or unfair means in the pursuit of their goals, since morality or adherence to norms is not their strongpoint. Barring a few such as *Charudatta*, the people in the play bear resemblance to ordinary 11



Sudraka:

mortals given to pleasures of the flesh. If rich, they indulge in vices such as

Mrichchhakatika

gambling, if poor they break the rules of the road and rob, waylay, resort to lies and half-truths, cheat and swindle. The writer sees to it that they reflect the time in which they live and appear normal in a world of inequality and class divisions.

We notice in this India, a full-fledged state with a king, the court, judiciary, traders, servants, slaves, among a whole variety of life's pursuits including concubines doing business and courtesans entertaining clients in full view of the society at large. The playwright ***Sudraka*** has ensured that the action of the play is confined in the main to such a city as the one described but

which at the same time takes its broader inspirations from the nearby villages and forests “ the lifeline of the world of prosperity and comfort. In the next section, we shall look at the thematic richness in *Mrichchakatika*.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1)

What is ‘Prakarana’? Can we call *Mrichchhakatika* a *prakarana*? Give reasons in support of your answer.

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.....

1.7

THEMATIC RICHNESS OF

MRICHCHHAKATIKA

Significantly, *Mrichchhakatika* has no gods and goddesses as characters. This we note in **Kalidasa** a great deal, who would bring in sublime virtues and qualities in an otherwise secular world of intrigues, crime and worse. In this regard, *Mrichchhakatika* stands out in the old classical texts giving account of exchanges between the holy and unholy, the resplendent and mundane. Here, one is face –to - face with the fight between good and evil, noble and ignoble, god-like and devilish.

As we begin reading the play, we confront Sutradhar and Nati, husband and wife engaged in a slightly teasing banter —they are in a playful mood. See the introduction of sensuousness that communicates not just through words but also through the visual, olfactory and taste-related, senses, (one can see, smell and taste), and enjoy being a part of the fare the play presents. Sutradhar notices that there are preparations in the house for welcoming guests with well-cooked food. When he reaches home one day, this is what he confronts. In his own words—

Here is my home, I shall go in. (entering and observing) Heigh-ho!

How is it that there is quite a development in our house! The passage is full of a long stream of rice-water, and the floor, which is dark-grey because of the iron saucepans moved over it, now looking more charming, like a decked-up woman. And my hunger is agonising me the more, if it were

greatly excited by this inviting aroma. ... One woman is pounding unguents, while another is wreathing flowers.

(Act 1)

At the same time, it is difficult to miss the simile, the comparison between the home and “decked-up woman”. The man-woman relationship that the viewer 12



will see as the play proceeds has so many shades of pain, longing and pleasure.

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Seeing this, Sutradhar wonders what the occasion might be, and if he is the

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sole beneficiary of the bounty. When he enquires about it to his wife, she gives him a half- baked answer that can be turned both towards the positive as well as the negative. Indeed, Nati disappoints with one answer and makes him yet hopeful with the following one. In the comic mode, this kind of ambiguity can as well produce more than a tickle between husband and wife. Consider the husband getting angry and happy by turns, this is a twist that well suits the theme of the play at the centre of which is, as is suggested, the fulfilment of desire between the two young protagonists, Vasantasena and Charudatta.

In the beginning of *Mrichchhakatika*, we are struck by two things. The first is the manner in which poverty is depicted, and the second is the deft use of the simile. The play is well crafted at the level of language, too, explaining a complex phenomenon through meaningful pauses, gaps and suggestions. The simile is a device to lay bare the character of a twisted situation—it comes with one or the other idea wrapped in layers of association. We notice that the simile takes the view of the audience away from the given issue, and puts it in an entirely different mode of thought for a while. When the audience has seen the logic away from an existing detail, the same is brought back to the play's context coupled with insight. Meanwhile, the audience has been equipped with a concrete reasoning with the help of which the original knot is untied.

A dramatic act of this kind sharpens the imagination of the audience and gives them a chance to use it creatively. The result is pleasure emanating from the excited imagination of the audience. We shall come back to it later in the discussion.

In the context, also see that the playwright makes a conscious decision to use prose and verse alternately. After the character has spoken her/his dialogue in simple prose, there comes a moment when comment becomes necessary as it opens up the scope of appreciation. Here, recourse is taken to verse—a *shloka* (usually a couplet) that raises the level of thought and makes it meaningfully appealing. This is used by the playwright as a word of wisdom.

In the world of average exchange of views, there emerges a saying, a general statement, a quotation that lights up the ordinary conduct of a person caught in a life-situation.

This is the first feature we note in the play. The second facet of

representation that catches our eye is of selecting an issue that touches social life vitally. In *Mrichchhkatika*, we can look at poverty that is at the core of the protagonist Charudatta's misery. It brings to the fore hidden agendas of the economically powerful, out to use means fair and foul to augment their wealth and resources.

Charudatta says of his plight:

Out of poverty and death, I prefer death, for death causes short-lived pain, while poverty is unending misery.

Is he right in his dark observation about the lack of means in a world driven by money and success? In another text of the ancient period, the issue may have received a treatment along religious and moral lines. The speaker might have suggested the illusory nature of material comforts that denies one the freedom that comes from interests in the divine. Here, the terms are broadly secular since money helps one gain happiness and social esteem, something that has influenced human behaviour all along in history. Consider the following: 13



Sudraka:

Charudatta: Loss of money is not of my misery. Observe—what pains

Mrichchhakatika

me is that guests avoid coming to my house because it has lost its riches, as the news fly off to desert, when the thick line of rut on the elephant's cheek totally dries up.

That money assists in earning happiness in the social-human sense takes the concern away from other worldly pursuits. In consequence, the person is closer to the real business of mutual give - and - take, as well as, day -

to - day experience. Charudatta is a man of the world and has seen early prosperity.

Suddenly, however, he incurs losses because of which he appears bewildered.

He has not lost faith in the material world where he was active all along. At the moment when the play opens, he is seriously engaged in the struggle to get back to his previous financial status. This is clearly seen in his intense suffering manifest in the following quote where he shares his worries with Vidusha k.

Charudatta: Friend, I am not really feeling any anxiety on account of the loss of my fortune, for riches come and go, following the course of one's luck. But this burns me that the people go thoughtless even in their affection towards a person who has lost his support of wealth.

The truth of his statement is that money might easily slip away from one's grip if one is not sufficiently careful and that its loss may result in the loss of friends.

Conversely, money ensures "support" from friends that will keep the rich person in a state of stability and peace. This is not a small thing in social life. At the same time, the acquisition or loss of money affords wisdom about the nature of life on the earth. Charudatta is a learned man. He knows how to philosophise and see hidden ideas in social endeavour. This is how the wisdom is hinted at in general terms:

Charudatta: From penury a person passes to shame; being overcome by shame, he loses his spirit; devoid of spirit he is slighted; being slighted, he feels dejected; full of dejection, he comes to be sorry; being smitten with sorrow, he is forsaken by reason; and destitute of reason, he perishes. Ah! Pennilessness is the abode of all sorts misfortune!

The mode here is of a gradual movement towards equanimity on one side and a disturbed condition of life on the other. Mark the clustering of shame, loss of spirit, slight, dejection, being sorry, irrationality and destruction. The logic suggests that they are connected and thus, ought to be viewed as bound to norms of inevitable doom. Is that true in life? If we ponder over it, we may realise that pragmatic behaviour goes by logic such as this and, if an individual observes the course of life alertly, s/he will surely gain from such an idea.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

1) Comment on the use of verse and prose in *Mrichchhakatika*.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the relationship between a literary work and its socio-economic background. This is followed by an account of specific details about the writer and the time in history to which he belonged. The issue of 14



*aesthetic form is also dealt with in brief. An important aspect of thematic richness **Sudrakha and His Play***

finally catches our attention. We noted that the ancient period had many aspects

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that are of interest to us even today. The plot of the play and the characters that live life to the full on the stage and involve the viewer in problems that they face will be taken up at length in the next few units.

1.9 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1.

Read Sections 1.1, 1.2, 1.3

2.

Read Section 1.4

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Read Section 1.6

Check Your Progress 3

1.

Read Section 1.7

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Sudraka:

Mrichchhakatika

UNIT 2 MRICHCHHAKATIKA: PLOT

STRUCTURE AND

ANALYSIS

Structure

2.0

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OBJECTIVES

In the present unit, we get to know the plot-line primarily. At the same time, we may keep in mind that a dramatic plot is not merely its story, but a plan under which the playwright executes a design of presentation. Generally, too, the dramatic text shows to the viewer that which is required

for narrating an account. In this unit, apart from considering the plot-line, we may offer for the young scholar a view of the happenings in a sequence. This will help us in placing the behaviour of the characters in context. This will win for us an entry point into the play - *Mrichchhakatika*. If we recall we discussed in Block I that **Bhasa** too wrote a play on the same theme – the courtship between Charudatta and Vasantasena. Let's look at the two plays briefly before we proceed further.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Before we begin to discuss the plot of this play, let us refer to the subject of comparison between **Sudraka's** play *Mrichchhakatika* and **Bhasa's** play *Charudatta*. The main similarity between the two plays is that they adopt the two central characters, Charudatta and Vasantasena, with respect to their identities. The two characters appear in both the plays mentioned as suggested by **Bannerjee**. But the dissimilarities are more prominent. **Bhasa's** play is short and has only four acts, whereas *Mrichchhakatika* has ten acts. In substance and texture, too, the dissimilarity looms large with **Sudraka's** play scoring over **Bhasa's**. The same holds true about the neat division of acts in **Sudraka's** play that has a large and balanced structure. Since our purpose here is not to go into the two texts to clarify text-related details, it will suffice that, as **Ankur** puts it, we tell ourselves about the existence of **Bhasa's** play that preceded **Sudraka's**.

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The play Mrichchhatikatika has a neatly laid out plot in the manner of the

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Morality Plays of the English tradition. As we know, in the Morality Play, Structure and Analysis

a well-known form of literary expression in the medieval period, the viewer was familiarised with established social norms that would always keep people on track. Accordingly, the adversary in life would always be considered wrong and immoral and, therefore, etched in sharpest terms for the benefit of the good and virtuous. Such a clarity between two sets of behavioural norms added to the appeal of the play because of which the playwright could exercise his creativity within the given parameters. See that at the centre of *Mrichchhakatika*, there are two characters: Charudatta and Vasantasena around whom the action revolves.

To serve the necessity of convention, we find here that the division of characters adheres to the cluster of men and women based on their belonging to these two personages. Charudatta's team of characters, so to say, constitutes Maitreya, Vardhamanaka, Samvahaka, Radanika, Dhuta and Rohsena . All of them are aligned to him in various capacities in a very precise and neat manner. Among these, a few are Charudatta's companions in all that he does, whereas, there are others in the group who exist as a part of his household.

The scheme is predictable and each member of the group performs the assigned roles he possesses. If, for instance, the pillar of the group undergoes a lean phase in life, the associates share the troubles visiting the main figure in the group.

Since the fate of Charudatta runs parallel to that of Vasantasena, she being tied to him in love, the duo form a yet larger group of positive characters.

In the latter's cluster of associates are Karunapuraka, Madanika, Kumbhilaka, Maid, Vita, Old Lady, Bastards, and Umbrella Bearer—some are her maidservants keeping her company and being part of her secret or open schemes, whereas, the others provide to her, company, services and protection. Together, this big group revolves around the two protagonists who find themselves threatened by a common enemy in the form of Sakara or Samsthanaka, "the villain of the play." Significantly, he is the brother-in-law of the King of Ujjayini, the place where the protagonists live. The neatness we referred to is borne out by this well-defined line-up between the good and the bad in the world of the play.

As the play progresses, we take note of the larger change happening in the background. Yes, Charudatta and Vasantasena are partners in love, but behind them is enacted the drama of a political upheaval. The actual fight is between King Palaka and Aryaka. The latter is described as "A cowherd and insurgent, later the king of Ujjayini." The question arises as to why the playwright draws the picture of a king with evil designs who is finally ousted by an insurgent.

The answer is not provided by the playwright, since that would give the play an entirely different colouring of serious intent.

Yet, the ouster of King Palaka from the state he heads serves a useful purpose in the play. It lends a realistic image to the restoration of Charudatta as a prosperous merchant later in life. Let us not forget that only a rich Charudatta will ensure stability to the relationship between him and Vasantasena.

It is assumed in the play that prosperity ensures happiness. It gives people importance and a sense of the world as a place to which one may belong.

The old saying is that money and privilege enable a person to pursue dharma.

Charudatta is always pained that he cannot entertain guests, cannot be with 17



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good people in his world. The first scene has many assertions made by

Mrichchhakatika

Charudatta linked to the condition of a new state of poverty. Even as he does not set much store by riches per se, being a man of simple habits, he requires facilities that will make him a man of consequence. Starting with the Prologue, we shall begin our journey into the world of the Mrichhakatika.

2.2 THE PROLOGUE

To begin with, let us be clear about the purely aesthetic nature of the theatre in a specific social setting, a city or town where people assemble to

watch a play. A prologue in the beginning of the presentation is a convention that facilitates a connection between the players on the stage and the audience sitting in front. It sets up an equation of relaxed communication between the play and the spectators. The audience that watches the movement of the action later in the presentation of the drama/ play begin to take an interest in the story since the prologue places them in a situation of friendly ease. This also provides to the spectators a sense of the atmosphere the plot will work in. It is obvious that the play is going to cut off the audience from the outside world. The more the audience forgets their homes and families as well as their work, the better it would be for them to grasp the reality of the story unfolding on the stage.

In this sense, the prologue is a necessary dramatic device.

We have called the prologue a dramatic device because it does not play any significant role in the dramatic action. Here, too, once the prologue comes to an end, the characters in it will not reappear later. Yet, Sutradhar and Nati tell the audience in no uncertain terms that what they are going to watch is a performance, not an actual part of life. Yet, the two characters appear so real that one starts believing in their veracity. However, we are given to feel that the play is an imaginatively created fantasy in which the audience will see something along the plane of an illusion. The audience who belong to different strata of society have come to snatch a few moments of pleasure from the performance and they should not feel that they are confronted with any specific question located in real life. The prologue draws a dividing line between the atmosphere of the play and the social life of which the audience is a constituent.

The prologue enables the audience to remain free from the bindings of the presented spectacle and to assess the proceedings on the stage independently.

How important is the plot in Mrichchhakatika? The question is important and a general view of it is suggested in the preceding sections. But let us address it specifically.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What purpose does the prologue serve in Mrichchhakatika?

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.....

.....

IS THE PLOT IN MRICHCHHAKATIKA

INTEGRATED WELL?

We have termed the play a fantasy. It is thus, meant to provide entertainment 18

to the audience. What we call dramatic action has a limit—it begins at one



point and ends at another. Between these two points, many incidents are

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presented in terms as close to the real situation as possible. Also, there are
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actual people playing the part of characters. Imagine that real persons are on the stage playing the role of imaginary characters. The real persons playing roles temporarily transform themselves into some others so that, an illusion is created and then the same is shared with the audience. On their part, the audience forgets for a limited period of time that they have their independent lives to lead and to which they will go back after the play is over.

In the explanation above, we have made a mention of incidents. They are many.

Even as they are separate, all of them are at the same time knit together in a single whole. This is what we might consider as the plot. The rationale of the plot is that incidents in it are interdependent and make a statement that the audience will interpret. The plot indeed is the crux, it might be called the play itself—the order of incidents, the efforts and standpoints of the

characters, the clashes, agreements and disagreements residing in the action. In the next section, we shall look at the various Acts in the play.

2.4 A VIEW OF ACTS I - IV IN THE PLAY

Let us look at the mention of episodes in the ten acts constituting *Mrichchhakatika*.

The First Act is described as dealing with “The Depositing of the Ornament.”

It refers to the running away of Vasantasena from her home and seeking shelter elsewhere. But she successfully leaves her ornaments with Charudatta’s friend Maitreya. The Second Act is termed “*Samvahaka, the Gambler*” and the third act gets the name “*The Making of a Breach.*” We see in the second act possibilities of growth in *Samvahaka*’s character who, initially was a professional shampooer but later took to gambling. When caught by a debtor on the road and pressed to pay up for the losses he incurred, he helplessly looks around for protection. Finally, he is rescued. Thereon, he decides to leave the path of worldly living and become a Buddhist monk. The act acquaints the audience with shades of grey in his character as well as the sympathetic traits of other people caught in the logic of social conduct.

In the Third Act, *Sarvilaka*, a Brahmin by birth, breaks into Charudatta’s house to commit burglary. Interestingly, he observes conventions of good behaviour and checks himself many times while taking the cask of gold from the home he broke into. He has a purpose behind committing this act. With the money from the ornaments, he will pay for the release of his beloved from slavery. The woman he loves is Vasantasena’s maidservant. The third act gives enough space to *Sarvilaka* for showing his house-breaking skills. The profession of committing thefts has taught him many things useful for successfully robbing people of their belongings. At one place in the act, *Sarvilaka* says the following about his clever and skilful ways:

I, who—am a veritable cat in leaping, a deer in bounding off, a hawk in seizing prey and tearing it to pieces, a dog in judging of the strength of a man according as he is asleep or awake, a snake in crawling, magic personified in assuming different characters, postures and dresses, the goddess of speech in the various dialects of different countries, a lamp during nights, a dudubha in slipping away from intricate places, a horse on land, and a boat on water!



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Sudraka:

Morevoer—

Mrichchhakatika

In movement I am quick like a snake, in steadiness, like a mountain; in flying, I resemble the lord of birds. In surveying the whole country, I am like a hare; in effecting a capture, like a wolf, and in strength, a lion.

(Kale 107)

Mark the versatility of Sarvilaka. Also, see that many of his arts have been copied from the movements of birds. The observation is sharp and fully assessed from the point of view of usage. Hidden behind the character of animals, birds and inanimate objects such as the mountains are qualities one may learn from and imbibe. The focus, however, is on the “breach” in the wall that enabled the thief Sarvilaka to enter Charudatta’s house. In the spectacle, both Charudatta and his friend Maitreya, referred to as Vidushaka, too, stand out as important parts of the plot.

Act IV, which will be summed up at the end as “Madanika and Sarvilaka,”

carries a statement by Sarvilaka. It is as follows: In some place I had to let go a man who was busy talking to his servants; in another I passed by a house seeing that it was inhabited by women only; and sometimes I had to stand like a wooden pillar of a house when a posse of the king’s watchmen came near me. By hundreds of acts, mostly like these, I turned the night into day.

(113)

But this statement does more than give the information. It tells the viewer/reader Sarvilaka’s state of mind, which is that of a man working hard to

earn for his beloved the freedom from slavery.

Another concern highlighted in the beginning of the act is Vasantasena's dignity as a woman and lover. She is a courtesan and is bound to fulfil the professional role of entertaining anyone who can pay for her services. Here, Vasantasena faces the crucial dilemma of being a lover and a courtesan. Whereas she likes the first from the core of her heart, she despises the second strongly.

Vasantasena is irked that the king's brother-in-law Samsthanaka has sent an ornament as a gift accompanied by the request that she reach him by his carriage.

The arrangement for this proposed act is under instructions from Vasantasena's mother. We notice that the preparation of liberating Madanika from bondage and letting her go to her lover Sarvilaka is positioned parallel to Vasantasena's decision that she would flout the norm of being a courtesan and to courageous enough to pursue undaunted, the cause of love. The next section examines Acts V – VIII.

2.5 EXPANSION OF THE THEME IN ACTS V-VIII

In the Fifth Act, Charudatta confronts in poetic terms the scene of gathering clouds. The same may also be happening in his mind where nothing but the love for Vasantasena has been growing. The courtesan Vasantasena is put on a pedestal by her lover. Quite dramatically, however, the counterpoint is made about her, the "harlot" as she is in the eyes of the society. Vidushak/

Maitreya calls her this after noting that she does not pay attention to him as 20

he gives her the ornament sent by Charudatta. Note the following:



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Never then shall I so much as even look at the face of that slave-

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born harlot! (sorrowfully) Truly, do they say: “A lotus-plant that grows
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without a root; a tradesman that does not cheat; a goldsmith that doesn’t steal; a village-meeting that is without a quarrel; and a courtesan that is not avaricious—these are hard to be found.

(132)

Such statements as this provide breadth to the meaning of the text. What Maitreya has talked of is not philosophical, but a set of mundane acts witnessed in the surrounding world. We may relate the connection between the details of social behaviour contained in the popular saying. The point at the same time is made well. He has successfully emphasised the fact of a courtesan being greedy and petty, putting her profession before love or devotion. This shrouds the comment with a double irony. It throws light as much on Vasantasena as on the accumulated wisdom of the time; it says, for instance, that social acts are bound to one another as also with those tendencies that are observed in nature. The smallness of the comparison between the social happenings and the natural phenomenon puts the scholar Maitreya in poor light, as one who cannot see the qualitative difference between the processes of nature and conditions that are thrown at people because of circumstances. The latter are human-made and liable to change that will result from other decisions the humans might take under other inspirations. Human behaviour does not follow the kind of pattern we see in nature that has precise laws to govern its movement or intensity.

The visit of Vasantasena to Charudatta’s house is to return the ornament she received from him as also the other one that Charudatta thought was stolen from his house. How the other one, belonging to Vasantasena, lands up at Vasantasena’s home, though she had entrusted Charudatta with safe keeping is unknown to Charudatta. The question is presented in a manner that reflects the intense emotion of Vasantasena for Charudatta and on the other hand the latter’s complete faith in her honesty. We referred to storm clouds gathering in the beginning of the section, in the next section we shall examine the significance of the storm clouds.

2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORM

Still more important in the Fifth Act is the storm following the gathering of dark clouds. As indicated earlier, it is presented as a mirror in which the passion of the lovers for each other is reflected. The grandeur of the storm

is caught in words, and on stage in particular, it may be combined with music, human movements, and the scene of trees falling, and leaves flying around. Act V, called

“A Stormy Day” ends on the following note:

Shrilly on the tala leaves, rumbling on the branches, harshly on stones and fiercely on the water; thus do the showers fall, resembling lutes played upon inmusical concerts to the keeping of time.

(147)

The attention paid by the playwright to the storm symbolises the commonness between nature and humanity. We do not miss the fact that the appearance of natural phenomenon presented through the storm is fundamentally a human act—that is how nature is shaped by the help of the human imagination. On the other hand, the impact of nature is only registered in the human mind (the 21



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picture of the storm is constructed because such a thing as the storm exists

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outside the human subject). Irrespective of how the storm is shaped by the human mind, it was already there as an objective fact. The point being made is that both humanity and the outside world of wind, vegetation, sounds and the facts of hardness or softness coexist and affect one another. For the playwright Sudraka, the storm is a happening of great proportions and makes him and the audience aware of the power and appeal hidden in nature. This is to be noted and equally well celebrated. The storm also arouses an aesthetic feeling, something that calls for definition and sways

humans into participating in the domain of movements outside themselves.

Act VI begins with a long exchange of views between Vasantasena and her maidservants. The conversation is marked by wit and playfulness. However, there is a tinge of sadness in the voice of Vasantasena; that is caused by the distance that exists between her and her lover Charudatta. In this act, she prepares to meet him away from home in a garden. This is the crucial moment in the play—it is an occasion of mix-up of the two carriages, the one of Charudatta that waits at the door of the house for Vasantasena and the second that belongs to Saka r/ Samsthanaka, the villain of the play and the brother-in-law of the king. The mix-up helps the important prisoner of the state escape from jail and move out of the city. The prisoner is none other than the would-be king Aryaka, a coward and an insurgent. This act involves a lot of action and suspense. Would Aryaka be able to escape from the clutches of the king's officers, or will he be captured and brought back to the jail from where he has run away? The playwright has presented the sequence of events in such a way that one mistake on the part of the officers will lead to another and chance happenings too, will contribute to Aryaka's great escape that will happen in Act VI.

Coming back to the sequence of acts, we are struck by the beginning of the VI Act; in it we get a glimpse of Charudatta's son Rohasena, a young child who wishes to play with a toy-cart made of gold. Rohasena's father having fallen on bad days cannot afford a golden cart. The maidservants of the house offer him a cart made of clay which Rohasena abhors. We mark that the play takes its title from this clay cart, a small detail that in no way reflects anything vital in the play. Yet, the play is called "the clay cart" or "Mrichhakatika."

As the said "mix-up" that gives the impression of being evoked by the cart of the child, is central to the VI Act, rightly then the act is summed up as

"The Exchange of the Carriages."

Act VII is short and shows only the climax of Aryaka successfully escaping from the arms of the state. In it, we witness Charudatta coming face – to

- face with Aryaka. The two exchange greetings. Aryaka is beholden to Charudatta since the latter has assisted him in slipping away from the city.

The act also carries the seed of the final resolution of the play that hinges upon Charudatta re-□ gaining his strong economic position; in this he will get the support of the new king. Also, the two men, Charudatta and Aryaka, impress the audience with their upright moral stance and indicate

that the city will earn stability and peace under the able handling of issues by a new king and his associates. The Seventh Act also lets the audience see that the value of goodness and a balanced temperament is essential for the smooth running of life in the kingdom. We see how the message of happiness and tranquillity is conveyed in an artistic sense in the play. The summing up of the action of this part of the play is descriptive—"The Escape of Aryaka."

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What has been initiated as an episode of serious crime in the Seventh Act is

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taken further in Act VIII. Here, the plot is well laid out indicating the intentions **Structure and Analysis**

of various characters at a deeper level. Till this moment, the servants or slaves in the play belonged to a category that gave them a simple and mechanical identity. In this act, specific lines of distinction are drawn. Have a look at Cheta (Sthavaraka) and Vita. The former is the driver of Sakara's carriage and the latter is described as a friend and associate of Sakara. The trio is engaged in immoral and unlawful activities in the city and the state protects them since its head Sakara is the brother-in-law of the king. Yet in this act, Cheta and Vita have a temperament of their own that comes out in clear terms. We can ascribe this to the crisis-situation in which they are placed, they emerge here in their individuality.

The main aspect of this act, however, is that it presents a crime involving murder and gives an altogether different turn to the play that is unexpected and horrifying.

The state is to go through a turmoil leading to the change of guard—the

present king will be ousted and new one, more humane and forward-looking one will replace him. This will then result in a total revamping of administration and the way will be paved for the merchant Charudatta's return to prosperity. This and the next two acts will work out this aesthetic strategy of the play and prove *Mrichchhakatika* to be an example of serious comedy and entertainment.

At this point, keeping in view the context of the humanity that resides in the heart of ordinary people, we may note the response of Vita, the friend of Sakara as follows:

Vita: Speak out, then, what it is.

Sakara: Kill Vasantasena!

Vita: If I kill her who is young, a woman, and an ornament of our city, and who, although a courtesan, bestows her love in a manner unlike that of the courtesans' quarter, and who is withal innocent, then with what boat shall I cross the river of the next world?

Sakara: I will give you a boat. And moreover, in this deserted garden, who would see you killing her?

Vita: The ten quarters are seeing me, and the sylvan deities, and the moon, and this sun with his brilliant rays, and Dharma, and Wind, and Sky, and the internal soul, and also the Earth, the witness to all holy and unholy acts.

(174-5)

The dialogues here are stylised and the views, too, are closer to the positive notions of Dharma. Yet, the situation provides to them the aura of humanist ethics. Killing is a serious act and forbidden by law. When Sakara, the one enjoying the protection of the king, asks a servant to kill a woman, the various points of morality and ethics get raised and the scope is further widened by references to the five elements, the Earth, the Sun, etc. The situation is repeated a while later. See the following:

Cheta: Let my master speak out what it is.

Sakara: Kill this Vasantasena?

Cheta: Please, master, don't ask me that! This noble lady was brought here by my unworthy self owing to an interchange of carts.

Sakara: You, slave, have I no mastery over you?

Cheta: Your Honour is the master of my body, but not of my morals.

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Sudraka:

So please, master, excuse me; I am verily afraid.

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Sakara: Being my servant, of whom are you afraid?

Cheta: Of the next world, master.

Sakara: What is that 'next world'?

Cheta: Master, it is the consequence of one's good and bad acts.

Sakara: Of what kind is the consequence of good acts?

Cheta: To be like my master, adorned with many golden ornaments.

Sakara: And of what sort is the consequence of bad acts?

Cheta: To be like me, who have become an eater of others' food.

So I will not do an unholy deed.

(175-6)

In this quote, the terms are clear and well-defined. These are joined, too, with ones that are imposed from above by the powers that be. The intention of the individual servant Cheta impresses us because of its stress upon principles.

He is able to see the bad and unholy deeds from the good acts quite crucially.

This lends an edge to his standpoint. In the broader picture of the play, the perspective of Vita and Cheta merges with that of the high-placed in the city.

The ideological picture getting drawn this way might eventually become an acceptable rationale. The play seems to strengthen such a value system. The scheme working behind Act VIII and Act IX becomes a foundation on which the new regime headed by the cowherd King Arayaka will stand strongly and bring stability to the city.

These details of the play add up to the scope of the plot that covers social, moral and administrative dimensions to the presented action. Even though Act VIII is given the title “The Killing of Vasantasena,” we see the episode from the point of view of the moral-aesthetic standards laid down by minor characters. This contributes to the play’s effect. The next section shall deal with Act IX & X.

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Examine the significance of the “Gathering of Storm Clouds”.

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2.7

INTEGRATION OF THE VIEW OF THE

STATE WITH THE THEME IN ACTS IX-X

Act IX of the play goes into the nitty-gritty of law, social structures and the way the mighty as well as weaker humans conduct themselves in the given sequence of happenings. We note that functionaries of the state such as the Judge, Sreshthin and Kayastha understand the issue of injustice well enough.

As the act begins, the Judge announces in no uncertain terms the evil

nature of Sakara. When Sodhanaka begins the court's proceedings and calls out,

"Gentlemen, here is this king's brother-in-law come to the court, who wishes to present a case," the Judge remarks, "How! At the very commencement, there is the king's brother-in-law wanting to present a case! It is just like an eclipse at sunrise, foretelling the death of some great man!" Yet, the state seems paralysed before King Palaka and his family that is given to autocratic ways and at keeping the interests of citizens at bay. In the city, the whims and fancies of Sakara 24



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hold sway. The court proceeds in one direction and the King's policies work

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as a deterrent to the smooth functioning of the judicial system. A dismal picture **Structure and Analysis**

of the prevailing system emerges in the process. Later, praise is showered on Charudatta's antecedents—the names of his grandfather and father are mentioned to establish his worth and moral standing. Soon, however, the facts of the case of Vasantasena's supposed killing begin pointing towards Charudatta's hand, who is accused of committing the act.

Act IX offers a long narrative of Sakara's tricks that present a topsy-turvy world. Can sense be brought back to the case of Charudatta being fought in the court? It goes to the credit of the playwright Sudraka that negative features of life, in and outside the court are piled up and no hope seems to exist for Charudatta's deliverance as far as proceedings of the court are concerned.

But the playwright has an eye for detail. In the length of the text, he works out a pattern in which chinks finally emerge and tables are turned against

Sakara potentially. But the might of privilege works to the detriment of Charudatta and the act ends on a note of despair. Neither the personal distaste of Sodhanaka and the Judge for Sakara nor the disapproval of the latter's ways by the general public hinders the anti- Charudatta campaign. The word of Sakara prevails. The court announces a death sentence to Charudatta who in turn bursts out with:

After my case had been investigated, by means of the ordeals of poison, water, balance, and fire, then with justice you might have today ordered a saw to be used on this body of mine. But as you are killing me, a Brahmana, relying simply on the words of my enemy, you will surely fall into hell, along with your sons and grandsons!

The final question remains whether Charudatta will be hanged for the crime he is accused of committing, and this gives a strong note of suspense to the play. From the point of the audience, it is a great moment of curiosity as punishment to the one they admire might bring intense pain to them. Act IX

is rightly given the name "The Trial."

Act X opens with the two Chandalas. They are the lowest of the low.

Proverbially, they are the messengers of death and represent only the snuffing out of life. It does credit to the playwright who provides ample space to them and in what they say is revealed their humanity and positive concerns for the virtuous and honest. In the play, they end up as executioners literally. Yet, they show control of temper and give the impression of carrying out the job professionally. A sort of dignity is discernible in their behaviour. The two Chandalas and Charudatta face each other moments before the execution is likely to happen. The exchange is meaningful. Read the following, for instance: Charudatta: (listening; mournfully) O you, the chief of your caste.

I wish to ask a favour at your hands.

Chandalas: What! You would take a favour from our hands?

Charudatta: Heavens forbid! Still, a Chandala is not like the ill-behaved King Palaka, who acts without due investigation. So, I request you for getting a last sight of my son's face, so that I might easily obtain heaven.

Chandalas: You may do so.

This works to intensify anguish and present the situation as a severe indictment of the existing regime. But since the play is fast approaching the end, latent 25



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expectations begin hinting at a resolution contrary to the one that is anticipated

Mrichchhakatika

in the previous act. Soon, Sakara's servant Sthavaraka will have a change of heart and he will spill the beans. The most to be hurt by Sthavaraka's conduct will understandably be Sakara himself. It is finally stated that Sakara has killed Vasantasena and put instead the blame on Charudatta.

Expectedly though, there is yet an issue with the ending. A play of this kind cannot end in death and attendant misery. The poetics do not allow it. Literature is supposed to offer entertainment and episodes of distress are to only heighten the effect of representation. In the last pages, Vasantasena comes to life, as if emerging from the ashes like a Phoenix, to announce that she is alive.

Accompanying Vasanasena's disclosure is the news of the fall of King Palaka and King Aryaka rising to occupy the throne. In this manner, "The Conclusion"

is an appropriate summing up of the complex pattern of situations on offer in the play. How does the play holdup? Given the many happenings and a sense of tragedy does the play have a tight or a loosely woven structure? We'll look at that briefly next.

2.8 PLOT, STRUCTURE AND ITS MANY

DIMENSIONS

What we come across in **Sudraka's** *Mrichchhakatika* is a dramatic rendering of a sequence of happenings that involve the love-alliance between Charudatta and the courtesan Vasantasena. This is presented in the background of different political happenings that are kept largely offstage. But the tussle between good and evil is squarely presented in a plot that is complex and virtue-driven. The sympathy earned by the lovers and the punishment visiting the villain is the staple of popular entertainment and the same has been achieved with effect. This is structurally built in at the level of the dramatic plot—it avoids all unnecessary details such as providing space to King Aryaka who will ascend the throne and King Palaka who will be ousted from power. At the same time, the long account of ups and downs as well as the re-creation of various scenes in the middle of the play's movement follows meticulous planning. This in brief constitutes the structure of the plot in which the happenings have been woven deftly.

It is evident that the play impresses on the strength of its density and richness.

Each act is a cluster of varied situations that have characters moving in and going out even as the unity of action remains intact. **Biswanath Banerjee** has rightly observed that

Sudraka has given evidence of his skill in arranging his scenes in a way hitherto unknown but which has added to the attractiveness of his drama. Almost in every act he has several scenes, one connected with the other and staged simultaneously

(28)

We may assume that such a view has noted the thematic integration that the play enjoys. Also, the points the characters raise and the decisions they take from one moment to the other in consonance with their behaviour traits lend cogency to the plot structure emerging out of the presentation.



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Check Your Progress 3

Mrichchhkatika: Plot

Structure and Analysis

1.

Examine some of the aspects/dimensions of social life as highlighted in the play.

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2.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have gone into the sequence of situations and episodes in Mrichchhakatika under the overall framework of the plot. We have noted in detail the treatment the playwright metes out to the characters such as Charudatta and Vasantasena. The plot of the play follows assiduously the pattern of comedy that exalts the theme of love between Charudatta and Vasantasena as lovers. Also knitted in the fabric of the play are accounts of ordinary people such as thieves, stalkers, cheats and gamblers and, last but not least, the machinery of the law prevailing at the time.

2.10 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1.

Read Section 2.2

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Read Section 2.6

Check Your Progress 3

2.

Read Section 2.6

3.

Read Sections 2.4, 2.5, 2.6 & 2.7

2.11 QUESTIONS

1.

Would it be correct to say that the love theme is central to Sudraka's Mrichchhatika? Give reasons in support of your answer.

2.

Comment on the nature of the plot in Mrichchhakatika .

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Mrichchhakatika

UNIT 3 THEMATIC CONCERNS IN

SUDRAKA'S

MRICHCHHAKATIKA

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 The Role and Function of the Prayer

3.3 The Significance of Sutradhar and Nati in the Play 3.4 Crisis and its Impact on the Hero

3.5 Administering the State: Repercussions

3.6 Mix of Comedy and Social Anarchy

3.7 Shringara, Love and Class Differences

3.8 Wisdom through Entertainment

3.9 Let Us Sum Up

3.10 Hints to Check Your Progress

3.11 Glossary

3.0

OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall take up a few important issues and through them highlight the concerns of the playwright at the time of writing this play. An attempt will be made in this unit to establish a link between the said issues and the characters that raise them in the text. Light will also be shed on the value and importance of the issues with respect to the emphasis and focus given to them.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Sudraka's Mrichchhkatika is a drama text and it falls under the category of literary writing. The writing involved the active imagination of the author who aimed to entertain the audience and to engage them with

situations they could relate to. The society in which the writer lived was uneven and difficult to comprehend. It was hierarchical in nature and at its top sat the king. The text of the play indicates in clear terms that the king in company with merchants, high state officials and judiciary ruled the country. The environs of the play are those of a vibrant city where trade and commerce thrive. It can be safely assumed that through trade, the city (of Ujjayini) has a vital linkage with the villages surrounding it. When we come to know that in the city's jail is imprisoned a cowherd insurgent called Aryaka, we become aware that rearing of cows would be an important occupation forming a vital part of the city's economic life. We can imagine that the rich and privileged in the city would be leading a life of luxury which is possible only when a huge population of the poor are available to render services to them. All this is indeed there in the play. It is a different matter though, that servants, maidservants, cart drivers, porters, door-keepers, and attendants draw attention only when they are seen at work in different places. The first question that can be posed in this context is whether such a social set up could remain at peace for a long time?

Additionally, we may ask whether the playwright will care to look at such an aspect and show some feeling towards it. This in brief could be the implication 28



of the word “concerns.” Here, “feeling” is a mild word to use. **Sudraka** has **Thematic Concerns in**

built the image of the protagonist Charudatta around the question of poverty—

Sudraka's Mrichhkatika

he is a Brahman merchant who has fallen on bad days and his decline from a prosperous man to one who has no money to live by is referred to again and again throughout the play. This is poverty of the gravest kind

since it entails a fall from above and one that causes great anguish. In the same manner, the management of a vast society along a legal framework and administrative function would bring in problems of disagreement, friction and violence. Humans caught in clashes to outdo one another would create a complex picture of feuds, and petty quarrels. **Sudraka** takes a keen note of all this and puts to use his imaginative might for presenting a picture of variety and fascination. We will get a view of this as we read the play from beginning to end. Let us follow this simple method of traversing the scene of the play and gain insight into the factors constituting the play, by examining the role and function of the prayer next.

3.2 THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE PRAYER

Let us begin with a remark on the prayer at the onset of the play. Gods, indeed, are important in the ancient period to which the play belongs. The two gods, *Brahma* and *Shiva* represent creation and protection respectively, these see to it, (if offered respect) that whatever well-intentioned act is planned for execution will turn out successfully. Such a beginning of the play that opens with an invocation is termed *Nandi* in the traditional sense. Also, mark that the verses set to music contain wisdom and goodness couched in philosophy.

Shiva is talked of as sitting in a yoga-posture and his sense is described as so suspended as to cause the cessation of all perception, by reason of the vital airs being confined within; and who, with the eye of truth, is visualising himself and the Universal Soul as one *Kale*, p. 59

In it, “the eye of truth” is stressed and may emphatically suggest that the play will adhere to the dictum of genuinely knowing what actually goes on in the surrounding world. The utterance would surely cause vibrancy across the play assuring that the dramatic piece so begun will reach the intended end uninterrupted. The same can be said of the figure of *Sutradhar* who, seeing the hall empty, says:

This music hall is empty! Where could the actors have gone?

(reflecting) Ah! I got it!—

The home of a sonless person is empty; he who doesn't have a real friend finds all the time empty; the quarters are empty to a fool; and everything is empty to a poor man.

(62)

Such quotations were given conventionally. The famous Indian classic *Panchatantra* is replete with them. They served the purpose of

authenticating a perceived happening in the manner of that which all believes in as established. Additionally, the verse connects directly with the state of Charudatta, the protagonist of the play when he appears on stage for the first time. Did the narrator Sutradhar and his wife Nati have a purpose in the play? Lets' look at that next.

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Sudraka:

Mrichchhakatika

3.3

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUTRADHAR AND

NATI IN THE PLAY

The beginning of the play arouses curiosity about the manner in which society that is captured in the play, functions. We note that the first act presents Sutradhar surrounded by worries of a peculiar nature. After he has made a general statement, he is joined by Nati, his wife and co-actor. The two are in and out of the first act and enjoy a kind of familiarity with the audience that makes them feel at ease with the environs. They indulge in fun and merry-making and create an atmosphere of pleasurable give and take. We visualise a relaxed audience facing the stage. The exchanges that Sutradhar and Nati have with each other present the image of an audience equipped to appreciate nuances of wit and humour.

The lively exchange between Sutradhar and Nati tells us about the class differences existing in the ancient period. By convention, Sutradhar was a person accomplished in the arts and higher learning. He would hold dialogue with the scholars of the times and also train artists as a guide and

teacher. He is held in esteem by the society's upper sections. This bestows on him even linguistic superiority that in turn places him on a high pedestal. In this play, Sutradhar ordinarily speaks Sanskrit. But see that he shifts to Prakrit, the language of the common people, when he talks to Nati. The latter is an inferior in the social hierarchy for being a nonentity in the world of arts and letters, and also since she is a woman. The play makes a deft use of the shift in language to draw a line of demarcation between the weaker and powerful sections of the society of the times.

The distance between Sutradhar and Nati is further augmented by the tone the two adopt in conversation with each other. Sutradhar is jovial but is generally authoritative. Nati knows that she is to remain conscious about her station in life which demands of her to show nothing but agreement with whatever the husband says. Yet, she has an agile mind, something that puts her in contrast with Sutradhar, who has a simple mind, not possessing subtlety and nuances of speech. When Sutradhar assumes a mightier stance, she punctures him suddenly with a turn of speech. This makes the former angry. Seeing this, Nati changes tack, retreats from the position she held previously. The question is, who comes out stronger at the end of it all? The answer is a clear affirmation of Nati as the more powerful communicator of the two.

Entry into the play is provided by the food-based argument between Sutradhar and Nati. During the discussion Nati has observed a fast which can be ended only when a Brahman is fed. The ritual of feeding a Brahman necessitates Sutradhar's inviting Maitreya (who from offstage) declines the offer—as it become clear that he is already enroute to another home for food and the tribute of money thereafter. The movement from Sutradhar- Nati dialogue to the inside of the dramatised action is smooth. Maitreya is Charudatta's close friend and a reference point to the latter's lean economic phase. We see that the quarrel between husband and wife is resolved successfully - as **Sudraka's** dramatic skills are underlined by such an arrangement of the Prologue. We face, however, the question as to why the Prologue is so long and elaborate. Is it that the first scene, which is a mixture of informal imparting of information and introduction of hidden tensions, will pave the way for calling in the protagonist to the stage 30



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so that the drama's serious business can begin? We need to think about it
Thematic Concerns in

as we analyse the play. Meanwhile, what is troubling our hero Charudatta?

Sudraka's Mrichchhkatika

The next section examines the trouble of the hero.

Check Your Progress 1

1.

What function do Sutradhar and Nati serve in the play?

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3.4 CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE HERO

On stage, Maitreya, indeed, is heard talking to himself but also announcing for one and all the point that Charudatta is facing misfortune and worry. See what Maitreya says in the manner of a general announcement: Or I, too, Maitreya, have to look for invitations from others! Ah, Fortune, you have made a pauper out of me! I, who indeed, when my friend Charudatta was prosperous, used to devour, day and night, upon the sweetmeats, emitting savoury smells at the effusion of breath, and prepared with great

care, and I, sitting at the entrance of his antahpura, surrounded by hundreds of dishes, used repeatedly to touch them with my fingers and put them aside when satisfied, just like a painter surrounded by hundreds of colour pots touching each with his fingers and removing it after use, and who used to remain ruminating like a bull in a public square of the city.

(65)

What strikes us as significant in this quotation is the long sentence containing clauses in which each has a narrative of its own. Charudatta is prosperous and his friend Maitreya enjoys dishes as a Brahman should in the situation.

The simile of the painter with many colours on his palette at his disposal is interesting. Just as the painter is shown to be creating an object of beauty, similarly the Brahman has many tasty dishes at his disposal to taste/eat. The bull symbolises relaxation as well as authority. The word ruminating is employed for the bull that is unconcerned with what goes on around it. All these images weave a picture of harmony and plenty. We may note that pictures in this description tell of a situation as much with information as with suggestion of sounds and hand movements.

The First Act is well laid out in terms of situations that are concrete entities.

They can be visualised by the audience. Additionally, they bring in dimensions of the larger society. This may be seen in company with those imagined few who share life's values with Maitreya. **Sudraka's** aim appears to be making him a symbol of goodness and virtue. We have, for instance, Charudatta and Maitreya discussing poverty with respect to its negative effect on life, even as it may not amount to much in the play. Charudatta explains it effectively.

Maitreya tries to console his friend by sympathising with him. He refuses to worship deities that do not reverse the misfortune of such a good man as Charudatta. As the play progresses we know that the stalking, chase, kidnapping, and proposed murder of Vasantasena is eminent, that aspect will be examined next.



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Sudraka:

Mrichchhakatika

3.5 ADMINISTERING THE STATE:

REPERCUSSIONS

Think of another situation in the play. It is violent and greatly disturbing since it involves showing of the chase of a young woman by uncouth stalkers. Mark that it is presented in a poetic mode rendering the description comic and serious simultaneously! If one looks at the woman, one feels a sense of helplessness, observing that there is no possibility of escape for her from her molesters. She is terrified and panic-ridden. However, the dialogues of the rogues have a discourse that is couched in repetitive words bound with a refrain. The humour emanating from their efforts and words is sinister. It may appeal to those among the audience who came to the performance for titillation. The play does not present titillation but shows the villainous group in a negative light. This is how the comic is to be interpreted in the context. To see the point in greater clarity, let us refer to the repetition of words in the description as follows: Vita: Stay, Vasantasena, stay!—

Why are you, setting aside your tenderness of limbs owing to fear, and plying your feet which are trained by the practice of dancing, running away like a female deer, frightened when being pursued by a hunter, with eyes casting affrighted and tremulous side-glances?

Sakar: Stay, Vasantasena, stay!—

Why do you go, run and scamper and stumble? Be pleased, O girl!

You won't die. Stay awhile. Indeed, my poor heart is being burnt by

passion, just like a piece of flesh fallen on a heap of burning charcoal.

Cheta: Stay, lad, stay!—

You are running away from me in terror, like a pea-hen in the hot season with her tail fully grown and outstretched. Here is my lord and master bounding (after you) like a young cook in the forest.

Vita: Stay, Vasantasena, stay!—

Why do you run away, quaking like a young plantain tree, your red silken garment trailing with its ends fluttering in the breeze, and dropping off the numerous buds of red lotuses, like a cave of red arsenic, being excavated with a chisel?

(68)

The chase and dialogues continue for quite some time till Vasantasena does the disappearing act and walks into safe territory. Consider the stylised dialogues that have the tone of a musical pattern. The remarks by the group of scoundrels led by Sakar, the king's brother-in-law, combine to turn the chase into a net from which the supposed bird, a helpless young woman, cannot fly away.

The details of life woven, in this set of the rascals going after a lone woman are so much a part of social discourse in a male-dominated environment that we in the modern era, too, see in it a close familiarity. It is horrifying. 20th century films and those of the 21st century are full of atrocities against women.

*Their purpose is to titillate the audience in such a manner that males in the audience accept them as a norm. In *Mrichchhakatika*, the account is focused upon the satirical manner. Mark the hidden suggestions of violence to be done to the woman as soon as she is caught. In the context, the first image is of a female deer pursued by a hunter. We note that passion in the male for the female body is expressed here in terms of burning charcoal.*



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*The third is of a pea-hen falling in the hands of a cook who would fry it and **Thematic Concerns in***

*make a dish out of it— vocabulary such as this - of cutting into pieces, burning **Sudraka's Mrichchhkatika***

and eating is repulsive. The last description leaves nothing to the imagination as the writer lays bare the entire game of dark pleasure graphically—

Vasantasena is being compared to a plantain tree—with its “red silken garment trailing with its ends fluttering in the breeze, and dropping off the numerous buds of red lotuses, like a cave of red arsenic, being excavated with a chisel.” The artistic control is manifest in the pictures that has been created to show the horror of the city scene. In it, the young woman doomed to bear untold agony, symbolises the helpless populace of Ujjayini ruled by an insensitive ruler. We may keep in mind, too, the mix of comedy and social criticism the playwright intended to exhibit. Let us examine this a little thoroughly next.

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Critically analyse the theme of instability in Mrichchhatika.

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.....

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3.6 MIX OF COMEDY AND SOCIAL ANARCHY

*In the scene that we are interpreting, there is another example of comedy used by **Sudraka**. It brings to the fore social divisions that create disharmony and a distorted value system. The playwright maintains a subtle distinction between the profound and ludicrous, alternating each with great mastery. In one case the king's brother-in-law Sakara plays the fool and misunderstands 'calm' for*

'fatigued' (the Sanskrit words shanta and shranta respectively). In the process, he waxes eloquent about the male not fatigued but as more aroused by the chase of a beautiful woman. The playwright uses it to combine absurdity and social criticism beautifully. Consider the following: Vasantasena : Sir, I am only a feeble woman!

Vita: Hence you are alive!

Sakara : Hence you are not killed!

Vasantasena (to herself): Even his courtesy strikes terror! Well, I will proceed thus, (aloud) Sir, do you expect to take my ornament?

Vita: Heaven forbid! O Vasantasena, a garden-creeper deserves not to be robbed of its blossoms. So we have nothing to do with ornaments.

Vasantasena : Then what, indeed, can it be now?

Sakara : That I, a heavenly personage, a man, and Vasudeva, should be loved.

Vasantasena (angrily): Enough, no more of this! Get away! You talk wickedly.

Sakara (clapping his hands and laughing): Friend, friend! Just see.

This courtesan girl is indeed very much attached to me and hence she says to me, 'come, you are fatigued, you are exhausted', while I have not gone to another village, nor to another city. Lady, I swear by my friend's head touched by my feet. I am fatigued and wearied while chasing you here and there.

Vita (to himself): Oh! The fool understands shranta (fatigued) when she said shanta (enough or calm down).

(aloud) O Vasantasena, you have spoken in a manner contrary to your profession—



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Sudraka:

Remember that the courtesans' quarter is dependent on young men

Mrichchhakatika

for help and also consider yourself like a creeper growing by the wayside. You possess a body that can be bought for money and hence it is like an article for sale. Therefore, O good maiden, serve equally one much coveted by you and one disliked by you.

Moreover—

An erudite eminent Brahmana, and also an idiot of the lowest caste, both bathe in the same well. Even a crow bends on the same creeper in bloom that had been bent by a peacock sitting upon it. And by the same boat Chandalas (Shudras) cross a river, by which Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas cross it. You are a harlot, and therefore like a well, or a creeper, or a boat. Wait upon all equally.

In the passage, the use of language as well as the act of giving Vita an opportunity to make a point about money and the market widens the scope of meaning.

Sudraka uses a very interesting ideological move by branching out into neutral concepts such as the articles for sale, or the boat not distinguishing an upper caste Brahmana from a Chandala; even if philosophically posed, lights up the scene enormously.

Given a play of this nature it is but inevitable that there will be class differences, and given that Vasantasena is a courtesan, the world of Shringara and love will also feature predominantly. So, the question really is what purpose does Shringara and love serve in the play? Let's look at

that next.

3.7

SHRINGARA, LOVE AND CLASS

DIFFERENCES

The play gains in the unfolding action. The two situations depicted for presentation offers a contrast to romance, shedding deep colour on sensitive individuals and mundane happenings in which ordinary people participate. The first is characterised by the talk between Vasantasena and Madanika involving love. The subject belongs to the category of shringara—

Maid: Sir, what next?

Samvahaka: Lady, owing to the large gifts he borrowed in compassion, he now—

Vasantasen a : has lost all his fortune?

Samvahaka: How did Your Ladyship know it, even before it was told to you?

Vasantasen a : What is there to be known? Virtues and riches are seldom found to exist together. Water is most plentiful in those pools which are unfit to be drunk from.

Maid: Sir, what may his name be?

Samvahaka: Lady, who is there that does not know the name of that Moon on this Earth? He resides in the merchants' quarter, he, of auspicious name, is called the noble Charudatta.

Vasantasen a : (joyfully getting down from her seat. And take up a fan, His Honour is wary with fatigue.

(Maid does as ordered)

Samvahaka (to himself): How! By the mere mention of the noble Charudatta's name they are showing me so much respect! Excellent, noble Charudatta, excellent! You alone really live in this world, while all other persons merely breathe!

(94)



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*We notice in the middle of the ordinary exchange a sudden shift to thoughtful **Thematic Concerns in***

*words such as live and breathe. These need to be examined in their deeper **Sudraka's Mrichchhkatika***

connotations. This is preceded in the quotation by the statement that "Virtues and riches are seldom found to exist together." This is then elucidated by

"Water is most plentiful in those pools which are unfit to be drunk from."

Significantly, the supposed elucidation leads us to an indicator of a broader truth that plenty is not necessarily good but rather the opposite, something extremely hateful. To reiterate, money and riches are not valuable in themselves, but only as items that make living easy. Also, if stored, they breed evil. The observation that "Pools which are unfit to be drunk from" makes a direct reference to the privileged sections who command not genuine respect but artificial adoration.

This bigger dictum is hidden well behind the simple details of life as is shown.

Further, "living" contains quality such as happiness and high thoughts because of which it is looked up to. On the other hand, "breathing" puts humans on par with animals that breathe alone and do not know the aims and purposes of life that might lift one to the heights of noble principles of sympathy and compassion. Mrichchhakatika is a great play since out of a simple comedy bordering upon buffoonery, it suddenly lights up the stage with insights of the kind brought forth in the quotation above.

In a significant sense, class differences exist in the play and are accepted as such by all. The subtlety of perception is, however, shown at work, and its

source is the heart of Charudatta, the Brahman caught in distress. He is generally of an aesthetic bent, and in the circumstances, his capacity to observe still deeper levels of understanding, is truly notable. This happens in the context of Vidushak, a friend of Chaudatta's and a Brahmana by birth who has come to spend valuable time with Charudatta. The latter arrives home and is received by a servant with a pot of water in hand in readiness to wash Charudatta's feet. This is how the act is represented:

Vidushaka: Varadhamanaka, call Radanika to wash our feet.

Charudatta (with compassion): You do not awaken a person who is sleeping.

Cheta: Sir Maitreya, I'll hold the water, and you may wash Charudatta's feet.

Vidushaka (angrily): Friend, here is this fellow, the son-of-a-slave going to hold the water, while he wants to make me, who am a Brahmana, wash your feet.

Charudatta: Friend Maitreya, you may hold the water and Vardhamanaka will wash my feet!

Cheta: Sir Maitreya, pour the water.

(Vidushaka does accordingly, Cheta washes Charudatta's feet and moves away)

Charudatta: You should also pour water over the Brahmana's feet.

Vidushaka: What good will water for my feet do? I shall again soon have to roll on the ground, like a beaten ass?

Cheta: Sir Maitreya, you are indeed a Brahmana!

Vidushaka: Yes, I am a Brahmana among all the Brahmanas, like the harmless and despised dundubha among all the serpents!



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Sudraka:

Mark that Vidushaka Maitreya has the hidden arrogance of a Brahamana

Mrichchhakatika

and none in the company minds it. But the playwrights stressed it unmistakably, suggesting its peculiar nature—the conversation is out of place in the circumstance of economic inequality. Thus, once the ritual of washing the feet is finished, the state of poverty comes to the surface and the poor Brahamana is the one who compares himself to creature that has no sting. Also, the economically mighty, bear comparison to poisonous snakes. The playwright's hand in showing the truth of the matter is unmistakable. Let us analyse another important aspect of art and its use in our lives next.

Check Your Progress 3

1.

How are Shrinagara and love depicted in Mrichchhatika? Discuss with examples.

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3.8 WISDOM THROUGH ENTERTAINMENT

Even as the talk so far has been smooth and somewhat inconsequential, it has offered a background to what follows—an episode of rare subtlety and brilliance.

It relates to Sarvilaka, the Brahamana adventurer who is forced by necessity to commit a robbery. Let us bear in mind that Sarvilaka is well-read in scriptures and conversant with knowledge of the highest quality. However, the playwright has assigned to him the role of a lover out to get his woman of choice freed from bondage. The act he is to commit is unlawful but the mission is of love.

This fits in well with the tone and tenor of the play—a work providing entertainment and a realistic picture of the complex world of ancient India. What strikes us is the dramatic conception of the sequence of happenings—on display being the sense of timing, changes and shuffles of detail that bring out skills of the writer impressively. Under the scheme, Sarvilaka breaks into the house of Charudatta in the dead of the night and steals the ornaments that Vasantasena had left with Charudatta while trying to escape from the clutches of rascals who were in hot pursuit of her. The scene of committing the theft is presented in terms of suspense. Thus, a single wrong move can be disastrous.

At the same time, the effective execution of the crime can provide satisfaction to the audience.

The question can, however, be raised whether the notion of moral conduct can be persuasively established with use of characters driven by desire alone. On the one side, we have Charudatta and Vasantasena who are upright and honest.

They generate an atmosphere of sweet emotion. Whereas, Charudatta is living a life of misery and want, Vasantasena suffers the pain of ignominy and helplessness. In this, too, the former maintains an exterior of self-control and discipline, and the latter appeals to the audience by her sense of straightforward love. As companions, the duo appears to be pillars of strength to the society at large. In the city, they are discussed as carrying the weight of righteousness.

This makes them a bridge between the established tradition of projecting the high principles of life on the one hand and a thin line between the newly emerged 36

world of success and manipulation on the other. The writer **Sudraka** walks



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on the fine thread of the immediate surroundings that seek balancing on standards **Thematic Concerns in**

of acceptability. It was a serious challenge that dramatic art faced at the time **Sudraka's Mrichchhkatika**

marked by transition. In the historical context, the old rule of the king to serve the cause of order was being fast replaced by a pattern in which trade was the pragmatic requirement. As writer of vision, **Sudraka** would not compromise on realism and kept instead his eyes and ears open to a changing scenario.

The requirement of capturing an existing world through recognition of its amoral parameters was a task worth fulfilling. With this end in view, **Sudraka** displaced the figure of the king and his court from the centre and peopled the play with the men of the streets. The task entailed the risk of faltering on the side of the immoral and becoming a means of presenting the vulgar stratum. Accomplishing a balance between the change in economy and society was a challenge for **Sudraka**. In response to such a question, we may think of the play that has so many characters. It appears to be the case of the many portraits that hang on the wall and draw the attention of the viewers to the wealth of pattern they carry. Indeed, the audience might lose track of what goes on in the play as a well-knit sequence. The crowding of personages on the stage and the lines of their movement may have criss-crossed interminably.

That is why perhaps, the last scene is heavy with issues. We are made to ask as to where it will all end, and whether some sort of answer will emerge finally.

We wonder, for instance, whether the play will end as a tragedy with the death of Charudatta? One answer is in the play of chance or fate. This is what **Sudraka** has used for ending the play on a happy note. But he has

achieved more than this. He has changed the entire texture of the play by using the shadow of change happening in the background. Mark that the said changes are of great proportions! It points towards the replacement of the unjust and autocratic king by another who is a people's hero. As we view the happenings on the stage, we are constantly reminded of the presence of the new king who escaped the scene in the beginning of the play but came back finally to assume authority.

This theme of grandeur in the background enables the writer to offset the imbalance caused by gamblers, thieves and tricksters. The latter eventually become colourful agents of the dynamic life that the circumstance of the time produced.

Check Your Progress 4

1.

To what extent can *Mrichchhatika* be called a play of hope? Discuss.

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3.9 LET US SUM UP

Sudraka's *Mrichchhatika* provides a vivid picture of the socio-political scene in ancient India that is ridden with issues of instability, poverty, and suffering.

At the back of these, however, are ideals that may shine forth when conditions became improved and the city gained is in the hands of a rightful authority.

Also to be recognised in the play is the various thematic concerns of love, emotional suffering, longing and pain. These are not presented as universally 37



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present issues of life. Instead, they are given specific colouring of the circumstance

Mrichchhakatika

of the day. Even as the concerns are of a serious nature, they are given the perspective of a realistic art resting on comic entertainment. This broadens the reach of the play. For this reason, Mrichchhatika wins appreciation in our time of crisis and contentious questions. The finally emerging hopefulness is a sign of the play's strength and significance.

3.10 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1.

Read Section 3.3

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Read Section 3.5

Check Your Progress 3

1.

Read Section 3.7

Check Your Progress 4

1.

Read Section 3.8

3.11

GLOSSARY

Antahpur: The inner part of the palace where the queen and her maids reside.

Bull in a public square: A picture signifying peacefulness.

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UNIT 4

MRICHCHHAKATIKA:

FACETS OF

CHARACTERISATION

Structure

4.0

Objectives

4.1

Introduction

4.2

Charudatta and Vasantasena as Central Characters 4.3

The Private Space of Women

4.4

Characterisation

4.5

Use of Metaphor

4.6

Exploring Sarvilaka

4.7

Sarvilaka as a Person of Art and Imagination 4.8

Character as a Carrier of Dynamic Change

4.9

Backdrop of Art as Problematic Conflict-ridden Structure 4.10 *Let Us Sum Up*

4.11 *Hints to Check Your Progress*

4.12 *Glossary*

4.13 *Suggested Readings and References*

4.0 OBJECTIVES

*In this unit, we shall discuss a few characters in **Sudraka**'s play *Mrichchhkatika* from the point of view of their role and function in the text and their complexities.*

*The unit will also examine the mental, emotional, and physical space that women share and analyse **Sudraka**' against the backdrop of the play.*

4.1 INTRODUCTION

We shall be helped in achieving our aim by a close look at the way the characters conduct themselves in the play. There is also an angle from where the authorial understanding behind them can be revealed. In the latter sense, characters are not what they are supposed to be in real life. This is never the case. Instead, the characters are invariably forged by the author in his imagination and on the pages of the text. Thus, they may not be considered as characters, but as characterisations. Through this route, we reach not only the values and norms that characters observe, but also the mind of the author that picks up specific temperaments for dramatic depiction. We shall look at the protagonists of the play next – Charudatta and Vasantasena.

4.2 CHARUDATTA AND VASANTASENA AS

CENTRAL CHARACTERS

Let us begin with a comment on these characters that have found a place in Mrichchhkatika for projecting the authorial intent. Charudatta is described as “a Brahmana merchant who is a citizen of Ujjayini.” Two things are important in his case—one, that he is placed in the highest caste, and two,

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that he is a merchant by profession. The combination of these two raises his

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social level very high. This is a combination of qualities of heart (such as sympathy), and capability to conduct worldly activities. The pragmatic

view shows him as a man of the world that is driven by the notion of success. He is placed in the category of a hero who is of evolved sensibility, tolerance, level-headedness and magnanimity. He is a leader of men. As such, he would be surrounded by people and would win credit for what he might do for others.

The playwright **Sudraka** has chosen Charudatta in preference to the kingly figure meant to rule the city. Is it not idealisation of a person? The crucial characteristic in him that draws our attention is of his being a lover. He remains a lover till the end of the play, and nothing can deter him from his chosen path. The trait of love sustains him as a human being, and increases his appeal to the audience.

Love joins Charudatta with Vasantasena, a courtesan. Her job in life is of providing entertainment to the privileged in the city. To perform such a role, she is highly accomplished in the arts, such as dancing and singing. Her youth and good looks enhance her value in society. Such a person would not be ordinarily associated with love that might align her with an individual. Love might take her out of the ambit of entertainment she is supposed to provide. Love is a matter of choice, and from the point of view of the profession chosen by her, she is denied such a choice. A woman of entertainment available to the collective will is supposed to consider the citizens as her clients who will buy her company and attention. As a courtesan, her concern cannot be the pursuit of virtue and morality. But she loves Charudatta and, therefore, tries to gain virtue by leaving her profession aside and foregoing money and a life of luxury. From the character of Vasantasena stems the need for an analysis of the private space of women as society was still segregated between men and women and their respective gender roles.

4.3 THE PRIVATE SPACE OF WOMEN

As mentioned above, the action of the play reveals love as a purifying, and chastening venture. It involves self denial of good things and redefines pleasure on its own terms. This lays a emphasis on those qualities that cannot be measured by money or social standing. We shall later consider this as the yardstick with which to measure the significance of characters in the play. First, however, let us look at a small group of women characters engaged in talking about ordinary matters of living within the private space of the home. This will give us a peep into the creative nature of women in ancient India, even as the world of that time was governed by the hierarchical power of men. The following from Act II may be the starting point of characterisation:

Vasanatsena: Friend, what next?

Madanika: Lady, you have not spoken about anything. How, then, do you ask 'what next'?

Vasanatsena: What did I say?

Madanika: You asked, 'what next'?

Vasanatsena: (Knitting her eyebrows): Ah! Yes!

Maid (approaching): Lady, the mother asks that you should take your bath and go through the worship of the deities.

Vasanatsena: Friend, tell mother that I am not going to bathe today, let therefore the Brahmana himself perform the worship.

Maid: As Your Ladyship commands. (exit) 40



Madanika: Madam, it is my love that prompts me to inquire, and

Mrichchhakatika: Facets of

not the disposition to find faults; so tell me, please, what all this
Characterisation

means.

Vasanatsena: Madanika, what do you see me to be like?

Madanika: I can see from Your Ladyship's absent-mindedness that you have fallen in love with somebody whom you have treasured in your heart.

Vasanatsena: Rightly you have guessed! Clever in fathoming the hearts of others, you are indeed Madanika.

Let us pause here to see the behavioural norms of specific persons. We note that three women participate in the goings on, even as the mother in the wings (mother of Vasantasena presumably), is sending instructions for Vasantasena to follow (This adds up to four women whose job is to follow the household norms and do the chores. The rest is the conversation that gives these ladies their distinct identities).

In the beginning of the quote, we are struck by the mental alertness of the maidservant Madanika. She loves the use of words. Obviously, “what next”

can be said only when the speaker is in the middle of the conversation. Here, however, the chat is started with the question “what next?” At the query of the maidservant Vasantasena wakes up from her reverie, and is forced to ask

“what did I say?” That is an interesting way of starting a conversation. Indeed, Vasantasena is lucky that she has such a lively companion as Madanika. This would keep the mistress amused and happy all the time, particularly at a moment in time when she is lost in the thought of her lover. The next point in the exchange between Vasantasena and Madanika is the bathing ritual and being a part of the worship of the deity aspect. The instruction for this comes from Vasantasena’s mother. The carrier of the instruction is another woman not mentioned by name and is merely called “Maid.” The response of Vasantasena to the word from the mother is that she is not in a mood of getting up from her seat. Note that the mood makes Vasantasena say something that goes against the convention of performing the worship. Also, she suggests that the Brahmana alone do the worship and leave the house. Yet, the chat continues, this time in the direction of the mistress’s absent-mindedness, and whether she is in love. It is clear from the exchanges between the two that love is closer to the heart of both. The interesting part is that the topic draws the two near each other and establishes a sense of equality and sisterhood between them. In this way, the wall of separation between the mistress and the maidservant breaks down and they now have a space of freedom to share. An author/the playwright creates the characters and gives them life. But how does s/he manage to convey a social reality through characterisation, if at all s/he does? The next section will address this question.

4.4 CHARACTERISATION

Before we move further in the discussion, let us explore the issue of characterisation in the hands of the playwright. The playwright has presented Vasantasena and Madanika as playmates that enjoy gossip

around love. The subject also proves beyond doubt that women in ancient India would converse freely and intelligently if they were in private territory with no males to pry into their privacy. Also, that class means little when it comes to agility of the mind.

The give and take between Vasantasena and Madanika shows that it is beyond doubt the fertility of imagination that is shared between women belonging to 41



Sudraka:

the lower and middle rungs of society. It also points towards the fact that the

Mrichchhakatika

playwright **Sudraka** was a promoter of decorum but he also gave scope to people of different sections to assert selfhood. This is clear from the way the mistress and the maidservant spend time together and secrets between the two are freely shared. Such characterisation helps build an atmosphere of close bonding, a hallmark of humanist representation. Aesthetically, too, it enables the viewer to enter the consciousness of characters on the stage where ideas, notions, sensations and feelings surge and win their own specific expression. Read the following to see how social, ideological and emotional areas are investigated—

Madanika: Well, I am glad indeed! Herein you are indeed obliging the mighty Cupid, who is a glorious festive joy to all young persons.

So Your Ladyship will please tell whether he is a king, or a king's favourite, who is thus desired to be served!

Vasantasena: Girl, I want to enjoy, not to serve.

Madanika: Do you love some Brahmana youth, distinguished for his deep erudition?

Vasantasena: I have veneration for all Brahmanas.

Madanika: Do you then love some young merchant, who has amassed a great fortune by visiting many cities?

Vasantasena: Friend, a merchant causes great pain of separation, by going to other countries, leaving behind his beloved even though her love for him be very deep.

Madanika: Madam, he is not a king, nor a king's favourite, nor a Brahmana, nor a merchant. Who may he be then, that my mistress desires?

Vasantasena: Girl, you visited with me the garden of Cupid?

Madanika: I did, Madam.

Vasantasena: And still you ask me, as if you are stranger?

Madanika: I got it! Is he that same gentleman who favourably received my mistress when she sought his help?

Vasantasena: Well, what is his name?

Madanika: My lady, he—of auspicious name—is called the noble Charudatta.

Vasantasena (joyfully): Excellent, Madanika, excellent! You got rightly.

Madanika (to herself): Let me speak to her now. (aloud) My lady, it is heard that he is a poor man.

Vasantasena: Hence it is, that I love him. For a courtesan who fixes her affections on a poor lover would not incur censure from the world.

Madanika: But Madam, do the honey-bees frequent a mango tree which has lost its blossoms?

Vasantasena: And hence they are known as 'honey-suckers' (It means that honey-bee are bit examples of true lovers, since they suck honey

– are interested only in honey)

Madanika: Lady, if you desire him, then why is it that you do not now approach him clandestinely, at once?

Vasantasena: Girl, if I were to go to him myself clandestinely, then, being unable to make an adequate return, he may probably make it impossible for me to visit him again, and that I wish to prevent.

Madanika: Is it for this very reason that you deposited the ornament in his hands?

Vasantasena: Girl, you have guessed it correctly!

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The mention of Cupid as a “glorious festive joy” provides wings to the mind

Mrichchhakatika: Facets of

of the maidservant as well as to Vasantasena. It also facilitates the entry of
Characterisation

the king, the nobleman, the merchant, the man with wealth, the “Brahmana youth distinguished for his deep erudition” and outside these, another person who could be a true possessor of dignity and honesty. The last characteristic belongs to Charudatta. Apart from characterisation, figures of speech and language too play a major role in a work of art. Let us look at the use of metaphor in the play.

Check Your Progress 1

1.

What function does characterisation perform in a drama text? Give instances from Mrichchhakatika to explain your point.

.....

USE OF METAPHOR

In the previous quote, mark the metaphor of the honey-bees that Madanika has used to comment on the love of her mistress. It is teasingly evocative of the beauty and taste of love. In a larger sense, it covers different layers of relationship between Vasantasena and Charudatta. From the reference to honey-bees, Vasantasena takes the cue and frames her own version of false love and lovers. She achieves the interesting interpretation of bees being “honey-suckers” that contains the word-twist and shows the questionable side of love that usually means gaining worldly benefits. For Vasantasena, however, love is to be sustained as an enriching factor of life.

Again, in the quoted lines, the entire talk happens within the parameters of the two characters. It leaves an impact on the reader. Among the mentioned categories, Charudatta is described as a poor person. This is specifically underlined to hint at the sensitivity and richness of feelings in him. When his name is finally mentioned by Madanika, Vasantasena has a sense of thrill running down her spine. It also becomes clear finally that of the two women, Vasantasena is the more intelligent—note the way she has planned things with respect to continuing her visits to her lover. The revelation of the scheme to Madanika is appropriately strategised for meeting the ends of her desire.

Vasantasena comes forth to the viewer as a deft combination of beauty and intelligence.

*So far, we have analysed in brief a minor episode of the play from the point of view of the characters—the way they were conceived by the playwright and then taken further on towards the final execution in the text. In this is reflected the overall attitude of the author vis-à-vis the world of his time carried by the characters in the play. See how characterisation is commented on by **Jagdish Chandra Mishra** in the following lines:*

*The significance of **Shudraka** as a poet-writer consists in the manner of characterisation of Charudatta, Vasantasena, Sarvilaka as well as Sakara. These are figures made of clay, as it were, that came from the contemporary society. The maker of the play in the pattern of Prakarana (a comic representation in the realistic mode) was a master scholar of religious thought, scriptures, old narratives, astrology, 43*



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political discourse, Hindu philosophy as well as Sanskrit and Prakrit

Mrichchhakatika

languages. This is authenticated by the fact that social descriptions along with a highly-evolved language and an extremely appealing style witnessed in the play are rooted in day-to-day facts of life. ...

The characterisation in the hands of the poet-author built up through the nature of society and its realistic, subtle and psychological knowledge prove this facet with telling effect.

(Prakash, A. (translation 25-26))

Mishra links characterisation gainfully with details of life that existed in **Sudraka's** time. In fact, the author and the cultural patterns surrounding him are expressed through the characters in the play. Having looked at the central characters and other women characters we will now turn our attention to the other 'male' characters in the play.

4.6 EXPLORING SARVILAKA

We may now shift from specifically the women characters to a few others. We will also consider other dimensions of human experience and social structures in Mrichchhakatika and this may help us recognise and comprehend patterns shedding a new light on the play's happenings. A most outstanding and extraordinary episode in Mrichchhakatika is of Sarvilaka who is described as a "Brahmana- adventurer who commits a robbery for obtaining money to ransom-off the servant-girl Madanika whom he loves" (38). This takes us back to the previous discussion between Madanika and Vasantasena that tells us about the former's vivacity and wit. A young

woman imbued with clever thinking that is at once steeped in friendliness and fair play lets the viewer feel sympathetic towards her. If the said Brahman-adventurer succeeds in his mission to set her free through his intervention, it would add to the positive impact that Mrichchhakatika as a prakrana might leave on us. We are told that the man is taken to robbing and stealing and over time has become a skilled practitioner of the art of thievery. It is indeed exciting to watch the man in action. This is how he announces his arrival in the play: Sarvilaka: Having made a passage for my business, by the power of my training and physical strength—a passage large enough to easily admit a man of my build—I move about, my sides being scratched by my creeping along the ground, like a snake with his old worn-out body casting off his slough.

(102)

This shows that Sarvilaka has worked hard to train as a thief. The effort has given him the “physical strength” that will come handy for “creeping along the ground.” A self-made man, Sarvilaka takes pride in having become like a snake that can move into any crevice of a house-wall, enter the house and move around stealthily in search of precious objects, ornaments etc and commit robbery. The metaphor of the snake is complete when casting off “the worn-out body” is mentioned. Is he not a well-read man in the know of discussions about literary expression? The answer would be in the affirmative, aptly corroborated by what follows. When Sarvilaka looks up and spots the moon

“about to set,” he bursts forth:

Sarvilaka: This night, in which all the objects are hidden from sight by the pitchy darkness, is concealing me as fondly as a mother conceals her son, a mother in whom all other sentiments are 44

overpowered by the intense blindness of love; I who walk about in



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fear of the king's watchmen, and who, supremely brave, am bent

Mrichchhakatika: Facets of

upon burgling the houses of others.

Characterisation

Here, "the pitchy darkness" is a soothing phenomenon like that of the protection given by a mother to her son. The comment is extended to take in its fold the mother's "intense blindness of love." This gives an unconventional connotation to blindness that shines forth since it lights the heart of the child.

It appears that Sarvilaka is in the heart of a poet using evocative images. Yet more indeed, Sarvilaka bears in his heart sharp contradictions of thought. When with the tools he is carrying, he makes a hole in the wall of the house and enters the antahpur, he exclaims about his dubious profession: Let people call, as they will, this a vile trade, which thrives well when people are asleep, and that getting the better of people by cheating them when they are unsuspecting, is mere thieving, and by no means a brave deed. Still, even a condemnable position of independence is preferable to serving others with folded hands.

The case is presented in moral-philosophical terms. He calls thieving an act of cheating since it is done when people are asleep and unsuspecting and, therefore, cannot prevent the act. Note the expression "a brave deed." It tells about the man who would rather think of carrying out great missions than deprive people of their earnings on the sly. But, then, he realises, as he goes into the complexities of the question, that an act of an independent man is better than that of a slave who renders service to his master with folded hands. There is dignity in the former deed, while the latter turns the man into an abject creature.

Can we associate a person, with the ability to venture into high intellectual issues, with breaking into houses in the dead of night? In fact, Sarvilaka is a poet-artist and philosopher rolled into one. From this point, the playwright **Sudraka** takes him into the persona of an expert in the field of his choice that is taken as subject of deep study. "Effecting a breach" is the next step in his scheme: Sarvilaka: What is that spot, which is loose soft by being sprinkled over with water, so that it would produce no sound when being bored through? Where could be made a hole in the wall, wide but not in sight of the passers-by? What portion of this building is dilapidated, having its masonry worn out by the corroding action of saline exudations? And where shall I not come upon women-folk, and still accomplish my

purpose?

(touching the wall) Here's a spot, worn out by saline action, and weakened by being sprinkled every day with water at the sight of the sun and here's a pile of rubbish excavated by rats! My purpose in hand here is as good as accomplished! For this is the best omen of success for us thieves, the sons of Karttikeya, our patron-saint. Now I have to begin my job; what sort of hole shall I make here? In connection with this the divine Kanakasakti has laid down four modes of making a breach they are as follows: to pull out the bricks when they are baked, to chip them off if unbaked, to wet them with water if they are of common clay, and to cut them through if they are of wood. Now this is a wall of baked bricks, so I shall have to pull them out. Here seven kinds of holes are possible.

(102-103)

The observance of the details is impressive that in effect builds up a scene of elaborate academic inquiry and the hard work necessary to take the mission 45



Sudraka:

forward. Still more, ancient India had committed scholars in all fields of craft

Mrichchhakatika

and the arts, including that of robbery. In the quoted lines, there is a reference to Kartikkeya. He was a known thinker and a rare genius. Thieves of the day started calling him their patron-saint and father. In this position, they would study his work assiduously and follow it to the last fragment. Imagine the seven holes out of which the appropriate one would be dug into the wall. In the present case, suddenly we see a comic turn,

when Sarvilaka remarks: Sarvilaka: When at night other walls were breached by me, as also hard structures, weakened by the action of saltpetre, the neighbours, seeing them in the morning, have condemned my crime, and praised my skill of handiwork as well.

(103-104)

The artist in Sarvilaka defines the dialectics in his action—together they bring out his practice as subtle since it evokes a mixed response from those who would watch the breach in the wall later. The crime he has committed will obviously be criticised but the skill, as he calls it, will win their appreciation.

What is the playwright aiming at if not that every human individual has an innate seed of energy that can only weakly be described as split? Really speaking, however, it is an integrated effort not induced merely by the evil intention but has a highly problematic aspect to it? In the present case, Sarvilaka dazzles the audience by the dialectic he carries within him. As such, the narrative is shaping up as an independent episode. It is a different matter, however, that it has a bearing on the central episode of love between Vasantasena and Charudaata. Both pairs have a close similarity—they are poor, helpless and yet seeking union in a world that works against the interests of each. Where the two pairs go in different directions is when Sarvilaka as a lover has taken to pragmatism for winning his beloved, Charudatta and Vasantasena have taken a moral and principled stand. The latter will not budge from the path of honesty that they have adopted. This explains their breadth of vision that might influence in the long run the larger audience tracking their movement. Let us delve into the character of Sarvilaka a little more in the next section.

4.7

SARVILAKA AS A PERSON OF ART AND

IMAGINATION

Coming back to Sarvilaka, his evolution as a success-oriented individual has proceeded along the normal path till he reached the stage of poetic expression.

At the specific point of nearing his goal, he turns blissful and fulfilled, even though partially. In a corner of the house, he sees a lamp burning. The question is if he should put it out. But, no! He is struck with its beauty and observes: This flame of the lamp, yellowish like gold, emerging through the hole and lying across the ground, being surrounded by darkness on all sides, looks like a streak of gold scratched on a touchstone.

The simile is constructed well even though he is pressed by the moment of making away with the booty. The aesthetics of his endeavour emanate from the surroundings. Is this the doing of the suspense, uncertainty and the villainy residing in his heart? Has it happened because he required a break from the consistent hard work he has gone through? We can only wonder. Still, a more plausible guess may be that Sarvilaka has a noble mission to pursue—it is 46



of love and the way in which the beloved Madanika can be set free from

Mrichchhakatika: Facets of

bondage. The combination of love and freedom from slavery render him capable **Characterisation**

of creating that beauty which he recognises in the flame of the lamp.

Later, at the completion of the thieving-scheme, Sarvilaka is in two minds again.

He is visited by the guilt that he has committed an immoral act by going against the existing norms of not depriving a Brahmana of his assets. His comment on it is significant as before:

Sarvilaka: Worthy Brahmana, you may sleep for hundred years! Alas!

For the sake of the courtesan Madanika, I have thus brought degradation upon my Brahmana family; or why, I have degraded my soul?

Fie upon poverty, on account of which one's manly nature ceases to feel disgust for unworthy acts! For instance, here I am censuring this ignoble deed, but am doing it all the same!

As we see, the sense of guilt is short-lived. Indeed, it has been suggested by the self-pity in words “but am doing it all the same!” A man of the world that runs principally by rules of manipulation, Sarvilaka changes tack and expresses the following:

Sarvilaka: Well now let me return to Vasantasena’s mansion to buy Madanika’s freedom. (walking about and observing) Ah! It sounds like somebody’s footsteps! I hope they are not policemen! Never mind—I’ll become rigid like a pillar and stand here. Or rather—are the police of any account to me Sarvilaka? I, who—am a veritable cat in leaping, a deer in bounding off, a hawk in seizing prey and tearing it to pieces, a dog in judging of the strength of a man according as he is asleep or awake, a snake in crawling, magic personified in assuming different characters, postures and dresses, the goddess of speech in the various dialects of different countries, a lamp during nights, a dudubha in slipping away from intricate places, a horse on land, and a boat on water!

This is the moment of triumph for Sarvilaka, and he is pleased with himself.

This mood has given him a swagger—he talks to himself and pays him glowing tributes. Through this self-praise, he also lets the audience know about the hard work one was supposed to put in if one had to pursue the career of a thief.

Sometimes authors and playwrights also use characters to signify/change.

***Sudraka** seems to be doing this with the character of Sarvilaka. Lets’ look at this aspect next.*

4.8

CHARACTER AS A CARRIER OF DYNAMIC

CHANGE

Does the quoted passage also inform us about the state of crime in the ancient period that was an evolved area of strategic preparation and meticulous execution? This appears to be the case. There was concentration of money in the city and the state saw to it that the trade sector was safe and secure.

However, money was in the hands of a few whereas the vast multitude was left to fend for itself. Many young men took to crime for this reason. It was



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Sudraka:

populace. The emotional aspect of life added to the agony of the young people.

Mrichchhakatika

Sarvilaka is in love with Madanika who is a bonded slave. In view of the existing law, she could buy freedom with money. The mission of Sarvilaka is twofold, to obtain his beloved and survive in the surrounding world as a person.

In fact, he turns a new leaf after securing the release of his beloved from bondage.

*His espousing the cause of change and facilitating a new king to take over the reins of the city is significant. His love for Madanika brings about complete transformation in his life. This gives focus to his endeavour and fills him with creative energy. **Biswanath Banerjee** puts this aspect of his role succinctly.*

To quote:

A poor and ordinary citizen has been able to organise a revolution and leads it to success is a fact sufficient enough to project Sarvilaka as having a personality with indomitable spirit, exemplary courage, much resourcefulness, sense of duty and sacrificing nature. In the beginning we find him rash and impetuous but slowly and surely the dramatist has turned him into a lovable personality with all care and sympathy. He has become a real friend of the hero who gains everything through his efforts,

and this character with youthful enthusiasm and chivalrous spirit may well be recognised as the sub-hero or upa-nayaka of the play.

(Banerjee 64)

Saravilaka's characterisation is such that it can envelop a whole series of actions moving in a specific direction. We see changes happening in his growth as a person through a clash of perspectives—he wants to remain true to his profession, and is also mindful of the established hierarchies that place the Brahmana at the top. The respect he accords to women in the scene is also noticeable. He holds a monologue with himself that reflects his intellect and morality. This makes him a typical as well as an individualised character, much in the manner of modern-day realism. The combination of goodness and evil in him sets him apart from Sakar, the king's brother-in-law who symbolises senseless violence, trickery and falsehood. The character of Sakar is interestingly drawn and requires some thought so let's look at how the purpose his character serves in the play in the next section.

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Critically comment on the theme of love in Mrichchhatika.

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4.9 BACKDROP OF ART AS PROBLEMATIC

CONFLICT-RIDDEN STRUCTURE

Sakara carries out his ill-conceived schemes with crudity and brute power. He stands for steamrolling opposition on the strength of closeness to the group that constitutes the state. The set of people keeping him company are equally cynical, not bothering about established norms of behaviour. They are safe because of the protection they receive from Sakar. Yet we see some difference between Sakara and his associates. The former runs a counter-narrative of his own, his concern being to prevent people living lives of dignity. Why is that shown as a lever to push the dramatic action?

In answer to this query, we might say that binaries of good and bad, intelligent 48

and foolish, moral and immoral were sharply etched in the older sensibility. People



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judged one another on the measuring rod of what helped them earn fulfilment

Mrichchhakatika: Facets of

*and joy, as also in reverse what obstructed their chosen path. Dramatic writing, **Characterisation***

particularly that given to dealing with issues of social living, selected actual living patterns and categorised them as promoting virtue or vice. This neat line is discernible in Mrichchhakatika. The division was moralistic and predictable in the context of representing reality. At the same time though, it left scope for the author to creatively engage with the questions of the day. In Mrichchhakatika, this tendency has indeed helped the playwright give free rein to his imagination and manufacture a world filled with vivacity, power and hopefulness against all odds. That goes to show that art had assumed great relevance in that period.

We could put him in the category of characters drawn in black and white. Set against the shining examples of Charudatta and Vasantasena, Sakara is a black character whose evil nature unfolds at each turn in the play. If he had his way, Both Vasantasena and Charudatta would have been dead as per the plan hatched by him. Sakara and his group/ associates are devoid of values of fellow-feeling, self discipline and sympathy for others. The attitude they have towards is one that perceives a change/ threat/ a challenge and something that needs to be met/ faced with all of one's power and might. Yet, like Sarvilaka who represents the intelligentsia suffering under the yoke of economic and political crisis, Sakara represents the unsustainable cruelty and oppression of the state.

Thus, we see the picture of an uneven and crisis-ridden society worked out through a whole lot of characters who together let a positive vision and comic outcome emerge at the end of the play.

Check Your Progress 3

1.

*How do you visualise Sakara as an example of characterisation?
Elaborate.*

.....

.....

.....

4.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed characterisation in detail by picking up a few characters to illustrate the different points. It is an important area since this form of drama necessitates individuals who interact with one another on stage and weave a well-defined narrative around their actions. As they carry forward the plan of the playwright, they reveal significant traits hidden in their behaviour and sensibility. In this unit, we analysed extensively a complex character that could go in two entirely distinct directions. The reference is to Sarvilaka, the thief and a Brahman scholar as well as artist in pursuit of his beloved whom he plans to snatch away from bondage by means fair or foul. This has become an occasion to reflect on other characters, too. Yet, this unit dwells on the points of individuals picked up from society for projection of the theme and the point of view of the playwright.

4.11

HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1.

Read section 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4

Check Your Progress 2

1.

Read section 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 & 4.6

Check Your Progress 3

1.

Read section 4.7, 4.8 & 4.9

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Sudraka:

Mrichchhakatika

4.12 GLOSSARY

Madanika: Literally, the word derives its meaning from Kamadev (Cupid). Since it is a name given to a woman and is accordingly modified, it denotes a woman who understands the ways of love as an expert.

Prakrit: In ancient India, the language of common use as distinct from its standardized and refined version called Sanskrit. The two coexisted. Prakrit remained ever close to the surface of life and drew its energy and creativity from there. Such a language would take influence from the spoken word of the day and went on evolving with the changing life-patterns.

Dudubha: The Sanskrit word for the eagle

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

*This block will take up for study **Ilanko Atikal's** Tamil epic Cilappatikaran.*

This will be a new area for most of us in the North and Central part of the country but our learners from the five southern states might be aware of this great work. However, the way we see it, this work will open new areas of investigation and will broaden our mental horizons to include an ancient text from Tamil Nadu that shows a rich influence of Jain and Buddhist influences on our literary heritage. We hope you go through the text translated by R

***Parthasarthy** as *The Tale of an Anklet*, published by Penguin in 1993. It is advisable that you read the text after reading the introduction by **Parthasarthy**, and before you begin going through the units. We hope you enjoy a glimpse into the rich cultural and literary heritage of Tamil Nadu and what you may have heard of, or know about, i.e, Sangam Literature.*



Cilappatikaran

4



UNIT 1 SANGAM LITERATURE: AN

INTRODUCTION

Structure

1.0

Objectives

1.1

Introduction

1.2

Early Sangam Literature

1.3

Tamil Poetics & Sanskrit Poetics

1.4

Themes in Tamil Poetry as per Sangam Poetics

Jainism and the Self in Cilappatikaran

1.6

Locating the Cilappatikaran

1.7

Let Us Sum Up

1.8

Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at what Sangam Literature is as most of us would not really be aware of it. We may know about the Ramayana and the Mahabharata but may not be aware of the Literature from the South of our country. We also need to have some understanding of this classical literary tradition from the south as the epic under consideration is an ancient Tamil epic belonging to the Sangam Period. We will trace the growth and development of Sangam Literature and then locate the epic under consideration Cilappatikaran.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian Literature is a vast area comprising numerous diverse traditions which resulted in a vast and a complex literature in the last 3500 years. Every part of India has produced classical literature in various Indian languages. The literature produced in ancient India includes the Vedic

corpus along with the Puranas, the Jain agamas and traditions and the vast literature produced during the Buddhist period which incorporates writings across Asia. The south of India has 4 major languages namely Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu. All of them are classical languages with a robust literary tradition and Tamil literary history is of nearly two millennia.

Sangam Literature also spelled *cankam/ chankam/shangam* according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, refers to a body of ancient Tamil writings probably produced during the “*chankams/ literary academies located in Maturai, Tamil Nadu from the 4th to the 1st Century*”. Sangam Literature is also referred to as early classical Tamil literature with works dating between 400 BCE to 250 CE. The word Sangam refers to an academy where this poetry was composed and later anthologised. The Literature of this period comprised three main types of literary works. We shall look at them next.

1.2 EARLY SANGAM LITERATURE

The most interesting feature of Sangam Literature is the fact that while most of the early literary traditions were religious writings in some form or the other, 5



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Sangam Literature is not religious in that sense. The poems belonging to what is called Sangam Literature are based on two main themes – love / *akam*, and heroism/ praise of Kings and their deeds/ *puram*. But we will deal with *akam* and *puram* in Unit IV in detail as these two themes/ emotions form a crucial part of the text *Cilappatikaran*.

The literature of this period was comprised of the following types of works:
1.

Ettuttokai (Eight Anthologies)

2.

Pattuppattu (The Ten Long Poems)

3.

Tolkappiyam (A Grammar Treatise)

The Ettuttokai or the Eight Anthologies of collected poetry are: 1.

Kuruntokai

2.

Narrinai

3.

Akananuru

4.

Ainkurunuru

5.

Kalittokai

6.

Purananuru

7.

Patirrupattu

8.

Paripatal

The theme of the first five anthologies (Kuruntokai, Narrinai, Akananuru, Ainkurunuru and Kalittokai) of the Ettuttokai or the Eight Anthologies of collected poetry is love/ akam. The theme of the next two anthologies (Purananuru and Patirrupattu) is heroism and praises of the Kings and their deeds while the Eighth Anthology or Paripatal contains poems that deal with love/ akam, heroism/ puram, and the praise of Kings and their

deeds. The poems on heroism/ akam are a refreshing change from most of the early and medieval poetry written in the subcontinent as there is a sense of freshness and the poems are not bogged down by the use of literary conceits and mythological references. However, that is not to say that the poems of the Sangam period did not have any connection with religious works. The Paripatal contains some poems that deal with chiefly four deities - Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, and Murugan.

Moving on to the next collected works, we have the Ten Long Poems/ the Pattippattu.

The Pattuppattu or The Ten Long Poems include: 1.

Kurincippattu

2.

Porunararruppatai

3.

Cirupanarruppatai

4.

Perumpanarruppatai

5.

Maturaikkanci

6.

Malaipatukatam

7.

Pattinappalai

8.

Mullaippattu

9.

Netunalvatai

10. *Tirumurukarruppatai*

Along with these anthologies of classical Tamil poetry there was also produced during this period a grammar treatise called the *Tolkappiyam* which deals with the rules and the norms of Tamil poetics which is distinctly different from Sanskrit 6



poetics, something we have examined at length through the three previous blocks

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of this course. Sangam Literature is a part of the literary and historical Introduction

rediscoveries made in the 19th century by a generation of Western and Indian orientalist who systemised the older manuscripts and translated them into English and subsequently published them in the print form. The rediscovery of the Sangam corpus was a major effort taken by a few men in the 19th century namely **Caminta Aiyar** (1855-1942) and **Tamotaram Pillai** (1832-1901) who discovered these old poems in crumbling palm leaf manuscripts and through exemplary scholarship translated and copied them to be published. **Tamotaram Pillai** published the first edition of the *Ettuttokai* (The Eight Anthologies) in 1877 CE. Subsequent efforts in the recent past have been made by scholarship like **A K Ramanujan** and **Kamil Zvelebil** who have translated and commented on a large selection of these anthologies.

Apart from the poetry that was written during the Sangam period we also have two epics that were composed and produced in manuscript form. The two epics are the *Cilappatikaran* and the *Manimekalai*. Both these epics have been composed after the Sangam period during the Buddhist and the Jain periods of Tamil Nadu. The *Cilappatikaran* is a Jain text with larger overtones of Jain philosophy and the *Manimekalai* is a Buddhist text with a heavy influence of Buddhist theology. The *Cilappatikaran* will be

discussed in greater detail in the course of this block.

The Tolkappiyam is the earliest compendium of Tamil grammar and consists of three sections. The first two sections deal with Ancient Tamil linguistics like orthography, phonology, morphology and syntax. The third section deals with prosody, rhetoric, poetics, genres, themes, behavioural codes, poetic diction etc.

The entire Tolkappiyam consists of 1612 Cuttirams which in a sense can be said to correspond to the Sanskrit sutra.

1.3 TAMIL POETICS & SANSKRIT POETICS

*The poetry of the Sangam period reflects a syntax and poetics that is not seen in the tradition of poetry from the north of India. This poetry does not have the influence of Sanskrit poetics and prosody on it. As mentioned earlier, the uniqueness of this poetry is the thematic division of writing poetry into the Akam (Poems of Love) and the Puram (Poems of War). These poems are further categorised on ideas of emotion which can be compared to the idea of the Nav Rasas by **Bharata** in his *Natyashastra*. There is a huge difference in the portrayal of these emotions from the Rasas. The Rasas talk about emotions which are permanent (Stahi) and those which are transient (Vhabhichari).*

The emotions portrayed in Sangam poetry are expressed through physical geography like the hills, the sea shore, the wasteland, the forest and the low land or the marshes. They are called Tenai and they form in the prosody analysis in the third section of the Tolkappiyam. The topographical related emotional Tenai's in these poems include:

1.

Kurinci (The Hills) signifying lovers meetings.

2.

Neytal (The Sea Shore) signifying secret meetings at the sea shore and lovers anxiety.

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3.

Palai (The Waste land) signifying a lovers frustrating journey through the deserted landscape.

4.

Mullai (The Forest) signifying happiness through physical and emotional union.

5.

Marutam (The Low land) signifying a lovers unfaithful attitude.

1.4

THEMES IN SANGAM POETRY AS PER

TAMIL POETICS

To understand the themes let's examine a few poems within these scenic landscape categories.

1.

*Kurinci (The Hills) signifying lovers meetings. This poem is ascribed to a Sangam poet called **Kapilar** and is a part of the anthology called Ainkurunuru.*

What she said

To her girlfriend, her foster mother within earshot: Bless you, listen to me:

My man wore the flowers,

Their blossoms gold,

Their buds, sapphire;

Tell me, what do you call

Those trees on his mountain slopes?

There is a reference to the emotion and its personification with mountain slopes that classifies this poem as belonging to the tenai category Kurinci.

2.

*Neytal (The Sea Shore) signifying secret meetings at the sea shore and lovers anxiety. This is a poem called What her Girl Friend said by the poet **Ammuvanar** in the anthology Ainkurunuru **What her Girl Friend said***

To him when he wanted to come by day:

O man of the seashore

Where old womaen

Dry their wet streaming hair

And look like a flock

Of herons in the bay,

When people said,

A chariot comes here often

Splattering

The dark neytal lilies

Near the bubbling backwaters,

Mother said at once,

“Don’t go out.”

Here there is a reference to the neytal lilies personifying the secret meeting at the sea shore.

3.

*Palai (The Waste land) signifying a lovers frustrating journey through the deserted landscape. This poem is ascribed to a poet called **Otalantaiyar** and is a part of the anthology called Ainkurunuru.*

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What he said

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Introduction

In the desert

*In this long summer wilderness
Seized and devoured by wildfire,
If I should shut my eyes
Even a wink
I see
Dead of night, a tall house
In a cool yard, and the girl
With freckles
Like kino flowers
Hair flowing as with honey,
Her skin a young mango leaf.*

4.

*Mullai (The Forest) signifying happiness through physical and emotional union. The following poem is ascribed to a poet called **Milaipperun Kantan** and is a part of the anthology called Kuruntokai.*

What she said

*Only the dim witted say its evening
When the sun goes down
And the red sky reddens,
When misery deepens,
And the mullai begins to bloom
In the dusk.*

But even when the tufted cock

Calls in the long city

And the long night

Breaks into dawn,

It is evening:

Even noon

Is evening

To one who has no one

5.

*Marutam (The Low land) signifying a lovers unfaithful attitude. The following poem is ascribed to a poet called **Orampokiyar** and is from the anthology titled Ainkurunuru*

What she said

In his country,

Spotted crabs

Born in their mother's death

Grow up with crocodiles

That devour their young.

Why is he here now?

And why does he take these women,

A jangle of gold bangles

As they make love,

Only to leave them?

The Tamil epics of South India Cilappatikaran and the Manimekhalai represent a society in a state of transformation dealing with a state of constant flux. The epical tradition in South India display ideas and characteristics of most of the 9



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early religions in India. The Tamil epical tradition also includes the later retelling of the Ramayana by **Kamban** indicating the permeability of ideas and cross migration of those ideas through time to be adapted and reconstructed at a later date and maybe in a newer form/ genre, but that is what all great literatures do, don't they? Before we begin talking about the two Tamil Epics one of which is in our course, we would need to have a little understanding of Jainism as the Epic Cilappatikaran is basically a Jain text. Let's do that in the next section.

1.5 JAINISM AND THE SELF IN

CILAPPATIKARAN

Within a couple of centuries, we know that Buddhism had spread widely in the India of that time and this is evidenced by the large number of Ashokan edicts found in the areas that are a part of the two Tamil epics Cilappatikaran and the Manimekhalai. In the meantime, Jainism was not too far behind as the Jain Agama tradition talks about the Svetambara guru Kalakacharya being received in the court of the Satavahana king around the 1st century BCE and the documented presence of the Jaina Digambara monk Visakhacharya choosing to establish his area of operations in the Chola and Pandya territories.

What is amply testified is that the two religions received immense patronage within the Pallava courts of Kanchipuram and the Pandyan courts in Maturai.

Kanchipuram is well known as one of the four Vidyastanas/ seats of learning mentioned in the Mahabhashya of **Patanjali** the others being at Kolhapur in Maharashtra and at Penukonda in Andhra Pradesh. The Cilappatikaran on closer analysis does not appear to be in a fixed religious

structure of Jainism but espouses a greater tolerance to the various beliefs around. The surrounding country, the politics of construction along with the religious interpellations constructs literature in such a way that the epic Cilappatikaran bears testimony to the fact that Cilappatikaran is in a sense a modification of the basic Kovalan and the Kannaki story which was a part of the folklore of the region and had been around much before the entry of the Buddhist and Jaina religions and thereby traditions.

The Cilappatikaran abounds with Jain themes and the idea of expiation is a major theme within Jainism. There are spaces within the text that indicate Jain themes but it may not be advisable to bracket Cilappatikaran as being a completely Jain text. The larger Jain observance that occupies the Cilappatikaran is the idea of Sallekhana, and the presence of Kuvanti the Jain Sadhavi who is a spiritual preceptor/ religious adviser. Kannaki and Kovalan ritually practices this extreme Jain austerity/ Sallekhana wherein the body is slowly starved to death. This is a classic example and the practice of complete non action within the body and the mind. If you recall the Rajasthan High Court had banned the practice of Sallekhana in 2015 terming it a suicide, however, the Supreme Court stayed the ban of the Rajasthan High Court later that year.

And she moaned:

‘Was this the fate of those

Who were my companions?’ She vowed to starve herself to death.

So ended her life.

The Vipaka Srutam or The Oral Traditions of Karmic Life, one of the 60

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Jain Agamas the canonical texts in Jainism divides the life of the individual into



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the sentient and the non-sentient the Jiva and the Ajiva and it is the world

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of Karma that creates the non-sentient. The state of Ajiva brings out the notion **Introduction**

of illusion and the notion of doer/ the primordial mover of the self and the ego. There is a conversation between a sage and the Jain nun Kuvanti at Srirangam where he explains to her the transience of life and the concept of Karma. This scene is also presented in the paly as it explains the basic Jain belief that an arhat or an evolved one has to intervene to guide a devotee/

a seeker of truth to the path of salvation. This idea is again very similar to the Buddhist notion of a Bodhisattava, a level below the Buddha / one who has attained Nirvana but who doesn't do that in order to help sentient beings.

This is an indication of how these two religions share common roots and similar world views.

No one can escape the prison house

Of the body's rebirth unless he is blessed

With the light of the revealed Agamas.

*The Jain traditions mention that **Chandragupta Maurya** settled down at Shravanabelagola and began institutionalising Jainism in the South and was to opt for the Sallekhana as a final mode of liberation. Jain history in South India depicts wide spread practice of Sallekhana or the ritual of starving oneself to death. It must be noted that Buddhism moves away from the concept and practice of Sallekhana as Buddhism focuses on the middle*

path and not on extremes. Hence, what we really find on careful reading of the Cilappatikaran is a larger shift within the literary imagination. The movement is away from the Sangam corpus with its emphasis on the five tinais the bifurcation of experience with emotion; the emphasis on land as in the Tolkappiyam where the land decides the corresponding emotion. The Cilappatikaran and the Manimekhalai though incorporating the basic Akâm and Purâm divisions is still able to make the epic accommodate newer traditions of the North. The different strands of influence that we see in the Cilappatikaran and the Manimekhalai suggests a slow but steady homogenising influence of the Indian literary tradition with the various telling's and re-telling's of the various versions of the epical traditions.

The larger dialogic impulses present in the epic seek some common grounds for the human soul though the matters of doctrine and the modes of achieving it differ. Within the Jaina Bastis present in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and the rock cut caves of the early years of the 1st century the epic point to a period in South India where there is a transition in the making, of a period from the earlier imaginations that engendered the Sangam poetry to a new fresher imports from the heart of the Indian sub-continent. In the next section we shall try and locate the text Cilappatikaran.

1.6 LOCATING THE CILAPPATIKARAN

The authorship of the Cilappatikaran is attributed to **Ilanko Atikal**. Now, the word **Atikal** literally means a Jaina saint or an ascetic. So what do you think we could infer from this? One stream of thought proclaims **Atikal** to be the younger ascetic brother of **Cenkuttuvan** (2nd CE), the Ceral King who renounced his family and the throne after hearing about a prophecy that he would succeed to the throne instead of his elder brother. It is believed that he then took the Jain vow of renunciation and entered a Jain monastery near Vanci. There is also another interesting legend associated with **Sattanar** the author of the Manimekhalai and legend has it, that **Sattanar** actually met **Ilanko** 11



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Atikal to seek his permission to bring out the Buddhist version of the epic.

This is interesting as it tells us that given the socio-cultural space of the times, there never was any large scale violence between the Buddhists and the Jains in history unlike the heterodox sects and the Hindu ones.

The setting of the epic is the cities of Puhar and Kân' ci within the Tamil domain.

*This is of significance as two significant Greek texts - The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea of the 1st CE and **Ptolemy's** Geography (2nd CE) mention the towns of Puhar as the town Khaberis and talk of the Kaveris Emporium and the flourishing Roman trade with the two Tamil kingdoms. Both the works describe at length the markets in the two towns providing a setting which is commonplace and populated with common folks much like the setting of our earlier play Mrichhakatika. Situated within the larger Jain and the Buddhist themes are the mercantile communities and the guilds and the role of trade and its contribution to urbanity with courtesans, palaces, the common man and the religious institutions and individuals who people the epics.*

Situated in the town of Puhar the epic – Cilappatikaran develops the kernel story of Kovalan and Kannaki, and as mentioned earlier was present in the oral tradition of folk tales and then worked on it. Since we do not have too many details on the genesis of the Cilappatikaran we may conjecture that the kernel of the story might not have been taken from within the larger Jain and the Buddhist traditions but could have been a local story that was later adapted for presentation to a larger audience who were primarily followers of the two religions.

The Kovalan and Kannaki story is ahistorical in the sense that all good

stories are, permitting the gaze from across time to shift and re-alter components within a discursive framework. The notional idea of the Manichean battle of the fight between the forces of light over darkness is interpolated within characters like Kovalan and Kannaki as they make sense of the world order around them across time. The Kovalan and Kannaki story precisely within its ahistorical positioning is able to gather its existence in history across time by being appropriated by other socio-cultural sects. So much so that Kannaki is worshipped as a deity, and as the epitome of chastity.

The story centres on Kovalan and his affair with Matavi a courtesan who dominates the relationship and with whom Kovalan has a daughter called Manimekhalai. He is not aware of the child he has fathered and she -

Manimekhalai is the subject of the sequel epic of the Cilappatikaran the Manimekhalai. Kannaki who is distraught by her husband's affair forgives him, when he realises his "mistake" and returns home. She (the wife Kannaki forgives him), reunites with her husband after the affair with Matavi is terminated due to a misunderstanding. In order to begin anew and recoup the losses they have incurred as a result of the affair, Kovalan and Kannaki migrate to Maturai the kingdom of the Pandian king Netunceliyan. Kovalan tries to sell Kannaki's anklet but is cheated by a jeweller, is accused of stealing the Queen's anklet and is executed without a trial. Kannaki is overwrought and goes to the King's court where she breaks open her anklet to prove that her anklet has rubies and not pearls inside (whereas the Queen's anklet had pearls inside), and in her extremely emotional state tears off her breast and flings it at the city of Maturai which burns to cinders. Thereafter, she ascends to heaven. Interestingly, 12

there is the presence of a Jain nun Kavunti in the epic and the beheading



of Kovalan is attributed to the misdeeds of an earlier birth (bringing in the

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entire Jain ethos of transmigration of the soul).

Introduction

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have attempted to provide a precise literary history of Sangam Literature. We have looked at the epic Cilappatikaran very briefly, discussed the sequel Manimekhalai, and tried to locate the two texts within their respective religious backgrounds/ philosophies. We have also seen from historical monuments how other religions and literary traditions made their way to modern day Tamil Nadu and enriched Tamil Literature.

1.8

QUESTIONS

1.

What do you understand by the term Sangam Literature?

2.

Is there a difference between Sanskrit Poetics and Tamil Poetics?

3.

Examine some of the themes of Classical Tamil Poetry/ Sangam Poetry.

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UNIT 2 CILAPPATIKARAN: A

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Structure

2.0 Objectives

2.1 Introduction

2.2 The Plot

2.3 Female Presence in Cilappatikaran

2.4 The Idea of Justice in Cilappatikaran

2.5 Destruction, Resurrection and the Ascendency of the City 2.6 Let Us Sum Up

2.7 Questions

2.0

OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at who the author of the epic Cilappatikaran is and then look at the way the plot is structured. We will also examine the female presence in the epic, the sense of justice, the destruction that is wreaked on the city, and the resurrection of Kannaki. In short, we will be also be a doing a textual analysis of Cilappatikaran.

2.1

INTRODUCTION

*The authorship of the Cilappatikaran is attributed to **Ilanko Atikal** a supposed and **Atikal** literally means a Jain saint or an ascetic and an interesting legend is associated with **Sattanar** the author of the Manimekhalai that he actually met **Ilanko Atikal** to seek his permission to bring out the Buddhist version of the epic which within the politics of the period is quite acceptable as there has never been a large scale violence between the Buddhists and the Jain in history unlike the heterodox sects and the Hindu ones.*

The setting of the epic is within the cities of Pukar and Kâñci within the Tamil domains are significant as two Greek works The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea dated at 1st CE and Ptolemy's Geography dated at 2nd CE

mentions Pukar as the town Khabaris and Kaveris Emporium and the flourishing Roman trade with the Tamil kingdoms and both the epics describe at length the markets in the two towns providing a setting which is common place and with common men within the larger urban setup unlike the larger North Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Situated within the larger Jain and the Buddhist themes are the mercantile communities and the guilds and the role of trade and its contribution to urbanity with courtesans, palaces, the common man and the religious institutions and individuals who people the epics.

Situated in Pukar the epic Cilappatikaran develops a kernel of the Kovalan and Kannaki story that was a part of the oral extant tradition and presents it in epic form situated within the larger Jain tradition to be presented before a largely Jain audience. It could have been as a result of the inroads of Jainism into Tamil society or as a result of the epic being presented to a Jain audience.



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2.2

THE PLOT

Analysis

The story begins in the city of Pukar a flourishing seaport and the capital of the Chola kingdom. The town is festive as the people gather to celebrate the marriage of Kovalan and Kannaki who belong to two prominent families in the area. The couple live happily for a few years in Pukar as Kannaki settles down to a life of domesticity and Kovalan begins to earn a living. What is noted here is the deep love between them. In the town of Pukar lives a beautiful courtesan named Matavi who is a very talented dancer. The Chola king in recognition of her talent presents her with a garland and a thousand and eight pieces of gold. Matavi decides to auction the garland to anybody who will purchase it at the price decided by her and in the process she would also marry the man who buys the garland. Accordingly she asks her servant Vacantamalai to announce this to the people of Pukar. Kovalan hears the announcement, purchases the garland and abandons his wife Kannaki and begins to live with Matavi. Kannaki is extremely heartbroken as a result of her husband's actions. Kovalan meanwhile is so enamoured of Matavi that he squanders a lot of his wealth away on her neglecting his wife Kannaki.

Soon it is spring and the city begins the celebration of the season with a special festival to god Indra who is the king of the gods. Everybody heads to the sea shore and Kovalan and Matavi set up a small pavilion there. Matavi hands Kovalan a lute and requests Kovalan to play the lute. Kovalan begins to sing a number of songs about a lovely woman who has hurt her lover. Hearing the songs, Matavi assumes that Kovalan is not interested in her any more. She takes the lute from his hands and begins to

sing a song of a woman who has been betrayed. Kovalan too begins to feel that Matavi probably does not love him or care for him any longer and leaves her. Matavi is heartbroken and writes a letter to Kovalan imploring him to come back. Kovalan refuses to do so and tells Matavi's servant Vacantamalai that at the end of the day Matavi is only a dancer and not someone fit to be in a lifelong relationship. Matavi is extremely unhappy about this and endures the loss silently. By the time Kovalan ends his relationship with Matavi, he is thoroughly impoverished and now at the mercy of his wife Kannaki.

Kannaki the ever dutiful wife has a nightmare about a misfortune that Kovalan will face. She is obviously extremely worried about her wayward husband and is overjoyed when Kovalan arrives home having deserted Matavi. Needless to say, Kannaki welcomes him back and the couple reconcile as Kovalan admits to his relationship with Matavi and apologises to Kannaki. The happy couple decide to leave Pukar together and go to the city of Maturai the capital of the Pandyan rulers to start afresh. They hope to begin a new life there by selling an anklet that belongs to Kannaki in order to start a new business.

Kovalan has no money left to begin anew as he has spent all his money on Matavi and is not inclined to ask either his or Kannaki's parents for a loan.

Early one morning they leave for Maturai and on the way they meet a Jain monk named Kavunti as they proceed to the town of Uraiyur. They pass through the dense forests that form the boundary between the Chola and the Pandyan kingdoms. Eventually, they arrive at the banks of the river Vaiyai and they get a glimpse of the towers and the homes of Maturai on the opposite bank. Kovalan leaves Kannaki in the care of the Jain monk Kavunti and slips into the fort of Maturai unnoticed by everybody including the yavana 15



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guards that are posted there. He begins a tour of the city to get a sense of the city that they intend making their home now. On his way back to the forest grove where Kannaki and Kavunti await him, he meets a Brahmin named Matalan who informs him of the birth of his daughter Manimekalai as Matavi has given birth. Kovalan shares the ominous dream with the Brahmin wherein he is riding a buffalo the mount of Yama the god of death, and we realise that, that was the dream that made Kannaki and Kovalan leave the city of Pukar. Kovalan explains to the Brahmin that the ominous dream was the reason for them to leave Pukar as they feared that some harm would befall him. Kavunti the Jain monk entrusts Kannaki in the care of a herdsman named Matari and both Kannaki and Kovalan begin to live with the herdsman's family and in their living quarters.

In a domestic scene in the epic, Kannaki collects some raw food from Matari the herdsman and cooks a delicious meal for Kovalan. Kovalan is deeply disturbed by his act of infidelity and he begins to despise himself for all the grief that he has caused Kannaki. Kannaki is deeply hurt by the memory of Kovalan's affair with the dancer Matavi and she expresses the pain and the anguish his actions have caused her. The reformed Kovalan is ashamed of his behaviour in the recent past and after listening to his wife, teary eyed he leaves for the town of Maturai taking her anklet with him to sell and generate some money to begin afresh. On the way he sees a humped bull which is considered to be a very bad omen but distraught as he is, does not notice the humped bull and continues on his journey to the market. He finds a goldsmith, shows him the anklet and asks for an estimate for it. The goldsmith takes the anklet asks Kovalan to wait and rushes to the palace of the Pandyan king to tell him that he has apprehended the man who has stolen the Queen's anklet.

Truth be told, the goldsmith is the one who has in fact stolen the Queen's anklet and is excited at the thought of putting the blame on Kovalan while he goes free and undetected himself. The King and Queen are not on talking terms due to a misunderstanding regarding the loss of her anklet and the King in an effort to please her and gain her favours again, is delighted that the thief has been located. Without ascertaining facts he orders that the thief be caught and executed without a trial immediately. The fact that he had the Queen's anklet is proof of guilt. Note that today we would decide that that is circumstantial evidence. The guards follow the goldsmith to his shop during which the goldsmith lectures the guards on morality and deceitfulness of thieves and their community.

He asks the guards to execute Kovalan when they reach there. The guards apprehend Kovalan and one of them cuts him down with his sword. Strangely enough the guards are apprehensive about striking Kovalan initially as they believe him to be innocent. Kovalan falls down once he is

struck and lies on the ground life ebbing away. The goldsmith is extremely relieved that the secret of his theft remains a secret and having got an innocent killed is safe forever.

He is very happy to have the anklet back and returns it to the King. As the reader/viewer of the play, we know that an innocent has been killed and that the anklet that has been given back to the King actually belongs to Kannaki.

While the real thief the goldsmith is a free man.

Meanwhile Matari the herdsman sees inauspicious signs in the herdsman's quarters and is worried that some tragedy is about to strike them. She and the others arrange for a sacred dance in the praise of Krsna in which they would enact his life story. After the dance is over Matari walks down to the 16



river Vaiyai to bathe where she learns of Kovalan's murder. She is shocked

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*and does not inform Kannaki about it as she feels that the news of Kovalan's **Analysis***

execution will break the latter. Kannaki learns about the execution of Kovalan through a stranger who informs her that Kovalan has been killed on the charges of the theft of the Pandyan Queen's anklet. Kannaki is distraught and angry and denounces the Pandayan King Netunceliyan. The people of Maturai also come together protesting the death of Kovalan and demand justice from a King who they feel has moved away from the path of true justice. Kannaki proceeds to the site of the goldsmith's shop and finds the dead body of her beloved Kovalan. In the process of embracing him he appears to stand before her and console her wiping her tears away,

and he begins the divine ascent to heaven.

He blesses her and asks her to live in peace.

Kannaki fighting for justice storms the court of the Pandayan King demanding justice from him along with an explanation for the hideous murder. The Pandayan Queen in the meantime has seen very inauspicious dreams and she is woken up with the piercing cries of Kannaki demanding an explanation at the palace. Kannaki holds the anklet in her hand and with her hair loose appears as a wild aspect of justice to the Pandayan King as he listens to her demand for justice and an explanation for the murder. The king protest as he claims that he is innocent while Kovalan was a thief who had been caught with the Queen's anklet which was proof of guilt and that it was his duty to punish the thief. Kannaki in a fit of anger breaks open her anklet and gems stream and fall all over the floor. The gems that tumble out are rubies which prove Kovalan's innocence as the Queen's anklet had pearls in it. The King is dismayed after confronting the evidence in front of him. He admits his guilt and dies out of remorse and his Queen follows him in death.

Kannaki deeply angered and in a rage, storms out of the palace and curses the city that has brought her so much grief - Maturai. In a fit of superhuman power that will later transform her into a goddess and an important part of the Tamil consciousness, she tears her left breast away from her torso leaving a deep wound in her body and hurls it over the city cursing it and the moment her left breast falls on the ground the city of Maturai bursts into flames. In a beautiful passage in the epic the presiding deity of Kannaki appears before her explaining the Jain laws of Karma and the problem of causality. She informs Kannaki that in a former birth Kovalan was called Bharata and that he was in the service of King Vasu where he had mistaken one Cankaman who was a just merchant to be a spy. Cakaman had been beheaded on Kovalan's orders.

So an innocent life had been taken. Cankaman's wife Nili is so deeply shocked by this injustice that she curses Bharata (Bharata was Kovalan in an earlier birth) and commits suicide by jumping off a cliff. Due to the effect of the Karmic cycle the presiding deity mentions that, Kovalan had to suffer in this birth. Hence, Kovalan had to suffer the same fate as Cankaman as atonement for his actions in his previous life. The presiding deity informs Kannaki that she will rejoin her husband in fourteen days.

Kannaki then leaves the city of Maturai and proceeds to the Chera kingdom and arrives at the Netuvel hills eventually. She ascends to heaven on the chariot that Lord Indra sends for her. This begins the transition of Kannaki to a goddess as the dwellers of the hills witness her ascent to

heaven. They inform the Chera King Cenkuttuvan about this miracle. The King is camping on the banks of the river Periyar and the poet **Ilanko Atikal** who is also present there tells 17



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the Chera King about all the unhappy events that occurred in Maturai. The Chera queen Ilanko Venmal asks the King to build a temple for Kannaki and to worship her as a goddess. The Chera king Cenkuttuvan decides to have a statue of Kannaki sculpted and has the sacred stone brought from the Himalayas. He begins the great march to the north of India where he seeks to bring the Arya Kings to heel and to prove that the Tamil people are as strong and brave as the Arya Kings. He defeats all the Arya Kings in a pitched battle and finds the sacred stone where the image of Kannaki is engraved and purified by the waters of the sacred Ganges.

Meanwhile back in Maturai, Matalan the Brahmin arrives with the information that both Kavunti the Jain monk and Matari the herdsman have ended their lives as they failed to protect Kannaki. The Chera King Cenkuttuvan then proceeds to head back to his kingdom where he installs the engraved image of the goddess Pattini / the deified name for Kannaki. The process of the daily worship of Kannaki begins at this temple. On the advice of Matalan the Chera King Cenkuttuvan performs the Rajsuya sacrifice and proclaims his lordship over the entire Tamil country. He begins the elaborate endowment of the Pattani/ Kannaki temple and slowly other Kings begin worshipping her as the embodiment of virtuosity and chastity. The worship we are told begins and is consolidated even in faraway Sri Lanka in the kingdom of King Gajabahu.

Eventually the goddess Pattani herself appears before them bestowing her blessings. This is the summary of the epic Cilappatikaran. In the next section we will look at the presence of female characters in the epic.

FEMALE PRESENCE IN CILAPPATIKARAN

India is a country that has traditionally been largely male dominated though, every now and then there has been a strong feminine voice as well. A singular case is the voice of Draupadi in the epic the Mahabharata who articulates both at the level of the voice as well as that of the body. She comes across as an articulate woman in the epic who voices her ideas on the injustice meted out to her and at the same time her open hair becomes a symbol of resistance (articulation through the body). This is not so apparent in the other epic the Ramayana where there is domesticity apparent with Sita becoming emblematic of a new ideal of womanhood which, has been and is being questioned in most discourses today. The two epics Cilappatikaran and Manimekalai (which is the story of Matavi and Kovalan's daughter Manimekalai and is a sequel) are singular as they have women protagonists who bring out the voice of injustice during the ancient period when these epics were written. They are also domesticated voices as in the case with Kannaki who endures Kovalan's abandonment of her or the case of Matavi the courtesan who accepts the fact that Kovalan has left her. Apart from this is the fact that the voice of Kannaki as an example of an injured womanhood of a universal kind is very apparent.

She transforms from being the ideal daughter-in-law (taking care of her aged in-laws even after being abandoned by her husband), ideal wife as she welcomes the straying husband Kovalan back to, a symbolic figure fighting for justice again for the same husband who left her for a dancer/ courtesan transforming into an avenging goddess and is later canonised into a benevolent, protective deity.

The presence of women as central characters in the Cilappatikaran and the Manimekalai unlike in Sanskrit epics where the male protagonist is central

to the plot is the influence of Buddhism and Jainism on the epical tradition of

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Tamil Nadu. Egalitarianism was a big thing in Jainism and Buddhism and it is **Analysis**

largely these influences that have allowed women to function with their distinct identities in the epic. The local context comes into play as well, when we see Kannaki being transformed to the goddess Pattani. This transformation in keeping with the local context, points to the creation of a newer imagination which results in the formation of new cults and belief systems. Tradition is an evolving process and this also points to the pluralism that was present in early India which provided a space for different voices to be articulated. This leads to the formation of a new goddess who is now imbued with a myth and a discourse which originates in a tragedy that involves normal human beings bringing out the synthesis between the human and the divine. Kannaki the woman becomes the symbol of a vengeful woman and when her presence as a transformed figure is accommodated in the Buddhist tradition, she becomes an emblematic voice. Her demand for justice assumes the universal nature of Dharma and finally there is the elaborate scene where she is absorbed into the larger mainstream tradition of beliefs and thoughts and becomes a distinctive goddess.

There are two kinds of women in the epic. One variety are the simple folk be it the herdsman or the domestic help or the women who have a distinct public profile as in the figure of the courtesan Mathavi and the other variety is of the divine. This is reflected in the figure of Kannaki who transforms from a simple housewife to a canonised goddess.

2.4

THE IDEA OF JUSTICE IN CILAPPATIKARAN

The Cilappatikaran apart from the status as a ritual epic in Tamil Nadu is also noteworthy for the representation of justice in the early eras of Indian history.

Woven around the mythological aspects of the epic is the idea of justice which has been subverted. Justice in early India can be seen in some early texts like the Arthashastra which brings out the early aspects of **Maurayan** rule and the idea of a King administering it with elaborate penalties for crime. The idea of a king as a divine figure administering justice is woven around the nature of the judgement. The king had to be impartial so that

the miscarriage of justice did not take place.

This formulation is very different from the ideas of justices as seen in a modern nation state where there are norms and rules not only in every country but there is also a forum where justice can be administered for nation states through agencies like the United Nations. The epic deals with early Indian social conditions where the idea of monarchy prevailed and hence, the conception of justice is based on the body of the king who is divinely appointed and imbued with the wheels of administering justice. The King needs to be a “just and fair King” who follows the Dharma as Dharma is important for administering justice.

The entire universe in the Jain and Buddhist tradition is governed by Dharma and any subversion of this would obviously result in a physical catastrophe.

*This physical disturbance of space is noted in many cultures and is reflected in many national literatures. An example can be taken from **Shakespeare’s** King Lear where Lear abdicates his responsibilities as the custodian of the kingdom as he begins the process of dividing the Kingdom between his three daughters.*

This is a violation of the idea of a moral code imbued in the body of the king.

Hence, any disturbance within this can lead to a physical catastrophe reflected 19



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in the civil war in King Lear and the subsequent death of King Lear. Something similar happens here in the Cilappatikaran when there is the miscarriage of justice. As a result of the miscarriage of justice by the

Pandyan King, the city of Maturai burns.

The error made by the Pandyan king was in not examining facts in the case of Kovalan. By ordering his death on the grounds that he was a thief he set up the problem of the violation of Dharma and he pays a price for this action.

The violation of Dharma in ancient literature is not just an individual act but the consequences affect a large number of people. This is apparent in early Sanskrit epics like the Mahabharata where a single error by Drtharashtra in not dividing the kingdom between the Kauravas and the Pandavas results in the Mahabharata war leading to mass scale destruction of lives. In the next section we shall deal with how the city of Maturai comes to be destroyed, is resurrected and rises again.

2.5 DESTRUCTION, RESURRUCTION AND THE

ASCENDENCY OF THE CITY

*Puhar the Khaberi (in the Egyptian records) of **Tolomy** and Maturai, are the two cities that form the setting of the epics Cilappatikaran and Manimekalai.*

Pukar known as Kaveri Poompattinam/ Poompuhar in old Tamil memory and Maturai are the two cities that appear to have been destined for destruction following the law of adharma that was committed by the King when he orders the execution of Kovalan. Much of what remains of Puhar is now beneath the sea; a part of the shifting coast lines and the geotectonics of continental plates. Modern day Madurai, is most likely where Maturai was situated. The areas we are talking about (Puhar and Maturai) have a historical reference to the sea eroding and reconstructing the coast line. Poompuhar was one of the most prosperous port of the early Chola s and both the epics Cilapathikaram and the Manimekalai mention the prosperity of the port. Cilappatikaran mentions the general lay out of the plan of Poompuhar in Section five of the epic when the festival of Indra is celebrated. It provides a fascinating glimpse of the early Chola, Chera and Pandyan economy where the markets streets are filled with traders from distant lands, where silks, grains, fur, cotton, coral, sandalwood, pearls, gems and gold are traded and sold.

On the edge of the burnished waters lived

And mingled as one traders from the distant

Lands, come for goods carried

By ships. With paints, scented powders,

Incense and fragrant perfumes, hawkers

Went around the city streets.

Further the epic mentions an interesting lay out of the port city with the suburbs being the residences of the princes and the landed gentry. There were separate streets for the astrologers, charioteers, bards, panegyrist, farmers, physicians, astronomers, dancers, harlots, flower sellers, betel leaf vendors, musicians and drummers.

One saw the fine work of making

Cloth from silk, fur and cotton

In the weavers quarters. Silk, coral,

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Sandalwood, agar, flawless pearls,

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Analysis

Gems, gold, and an endless profusion

Of rare ornaments were piled high

In the commodious streets.

The image painted of the city in the epic is almost like the land of plenty where:

Heaped separately

Were grains in the streets of the grain merchants, As also a variety of provisions distinct from one Another.

The various trades practised by the people, the types of food and wines sold are all described very vividly. It's almost like the cataloguing that happens in Greek Epics.

Peddlers of pastry, appam;

Women hawking wine; fishermen

Offering fish for sale; vendors

Of white salt; sellers of betel

Leaves; perfumers; butchers flogging

Different kinds of meat; oil mongers;

Overcrowded shops packed with food;

Braziers; coppersmiths; painters; sculptors;

Goldsmiths; jewellers; tailors; cobblers;

A host of artisans making various

Flawless objects with cloth and pith;

The homes of great musicians, expert

In the traditions of music, who could display

Impeccable skill on the flute and the lute by sounding The first seven notes; and other workers

Who excelled in small crafts-

All had their homes in the suburbs of the city.

Apart from the description of trades plied, commodities bought and sold, types of food, the dwelling spaces of different occupational holders are also mentioned.

In the city itself stood the Kingsway,

The flagged car street, the market square,

The boulevard where merchant princes dwelt

In tall mansions, the brahman homes,

*The houses of landed families and their tenants Farmers, of physicians,
astrologers and those employed In other tasks, the broad street*

Of the homes of those who with skill bored

Holes into bright gems, and those who polished

Ornate conches. In separate houses

Lived charioteers, bards, panegyrists.

Astronomers, handsome dancers, harlots,

Actresses, flower and betel girls,

Maidservants, professional musicians.

Drummers of various sorts, and jesters.

Surrounding the fort were the spacious houses

Of cavalrymen with swift horses, riders

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Of male elephants, drivers of lofty chariots,

Fierce looking soldiers. Celebrated in song

Was this part of the town and well known

For the great and renowned men who lived there.

It was a part of the larger / popular imagination, of a big port city. Moreover being the capital city it occupied a special place in the imagination of the poets who received the impressions of the past through the glory sung within literature and through collective memory/ folk songs. It had a resonance like the Sthala Puranas/ the narrative of places. Both the epics being urban epics in the classical sense celebrate the city and the various hues of the city. The impressions of the city have been drawn long after the original sites have disappeared with the passage of time, much like Krishna's Dwarka that is celebrated in the Mahabharata as a part of the collective unconscious that is handed down from one generation to the next. It is important to note that simply because the physical city itself is long gone, faced by the ravages of time and natural calamities like tsunamis and earthquakes, the memories of the lost city are consequently rebuilt

- layer by layer of memory that cut across time as seen in Poompuhar of Cilappatikaran.

Somewhere though in the stratigraphic layers of the soil on the land and at the silt on the bottom of the ocean lie the physical remnants of the old imagination; artefacts of daily use that have not biodegraded like bronze coins, terracotta, sculptures in stone and beads. The land below holds within the layers of soil entire cities with fort battlements, residences and streets now reduced to rubble and mere foundations. This is also seen beneath the sea near the coasts as the eroding coast lines tsunamis swallow entire cities leaving remnants for marine archaeologists to discover and in the case of Poompuhar the old submerged city has been found and the many Maturai s of the creative and folk imagination are connected with the lost lands swallowed up by the sea. Take for instance the case of Kumari Kandam or the Tamil lost lands. Kumari stands for Cape Camorin and it is now connected deeply within Tamil nationalism to the lost submerged mythical continent of Lemuria.

2.6

LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have summarised the epic Cilappatikaran, we have examined the presence of female characters in the epic, looked at the sense of justice, the Jain influence on the epic and also at the collective

consciousness/ memory that contributes to the nation building/ myth making process.

2.7

QUESTIONS

1.

Who is the author of Cilappatikaran? Why do you think authorship is speculated?

2.

Outline the plot of Cilappatikaran.

3.

Comment on the female presence in Cilappatikaran.

4.

Discuss the idea of justice in Cilappatikaran.

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UNIT 3 THE DIVINE, THE HUMAN

AND THE IMMORTALISED

CHARACTERS IN

CILAPATTIKARAM

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Types of Characters in Cilappatikaran

3.3 Characters in Cilappatikaran

3.3.1 Divine Characters in Cilappatikaran

3.3.2 Human Characters in Cilappatikaran

3.3.3 Immortalised Characters in Cilappatikaran 3.4 Divine Characters in Cilappatikaran

3.5 Human Characters in Cilappatikaran

3.6 Immortalised Characters in Cilappatikaran

3.7 Let Us Sum Up

3.8 Questions

3.0

OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at the characterisation in the epic. The Cilappatikaran is a Tamil epic belonging to the Sangam period and is considered by scholars to be one of the five finest epics of Tamil Literature. As discussed earlier, all literary works usually have characters and in some cases there are human characters, and in other cases there are both human and divine characters, Cilappatikaran has three distinct types of characters – the human, the divine and the immortal. We will be examining the intermingling and intersection of these three types of characters in the Cilappatikaran.

3.1

INTRODUCTION

An important feature of all epics is that it has both human and divine characters.

The North Indian epics in Sanskrit, namely, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have divine characters that are incarnated as mortals. Cilappattikaram, the Tamil epic, is different from the Sanskrit ones in the sense that it has not only human and divine characters but also a third type – human turned into the divine instead of being merely the incarnation of various gods. The ideal of karpu (chastity) and the dynamics of power play are crucial in the relationship of these three types of characters.

3.2

TYPES OF CHARACTERS IN

CILAPPATIKARAN

B Mangalam explains the novelty of Cilappattikaram through the characterisation of the divine and mortal characters: 23



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Unlike the Sanskritic epics like Mahabharata, the Ramayana or the Greek epics like the Iliad or the Odyssey, the protagonists in all the five Tamil epics belong to the merchant class...The poem opens with the marriage of Kannagi - Kovalan and their happy settling down to domesticity. They are not semi-divine heroic characters fighting for a cause ... Kannagi gains a divine stature at the end of the epic while divine/royal/semi-divine epic heroes in the epics of other traditions stand humanized towards the end of

their lives/ careers.

Having said earlier on that there are three types of characters in the Cilappatikaran, let's look at each category next. Human Characters, Divine Characters and the Immortalised Characters are the three categories of characters in the epic and we begin by looking at the Divine characters next.

3.3 CHARACTERS IN CILAPPATIKARAN

As mentioned earlier there are three categories or types of characters in the Cilappatikaran: the Divine Characters, the Human Characters and the Immortalised Characters. Let's begin by listing the main characters of each category and then looking at them and the purpose they serve in some detail.

3.3.1 Divine Characters in Cilappatikaran

Lord Indra

Lord Shiva

Lord Murugan

Lord of Death

3.3.2

Human Characters in Cilappatikaran

Kovalan: Son of a wealthy merchant in Puhar Kannaki: Wife of Kovalan

Masattuvan: A wealthy grain merchant and the father of Kovalan Matavi: A beautiful courtesan dancer

Chitravathi: Madhavi's Mother

Vasavadaththai: Madhavi's female friend

Kosigan: Madhavi's messenger to Kovalan

Matalan: A Brahmin visitor to Madurai from Puhar Kavunthi Adigal: A Jain nun

Netunceliyan: Pantiya king

Kopperundevi: Pantiya Queen

Cenkuttuvan: Ceral king

3.3.3 Immortalised Characters in Cilappatikaran

Kovalan

Kannaki

Valli

3.4

DIVINE CHARACTERS IN CILAPPATIKARAN

The ancient Tamil epic Cilappatikaran has a few divine characters. They have minor roles in the plot. Nevertheless, they are not insignificant. They do not appear directly in the plot. Rather, their actions are narrated by others. In The Book of Vanci, the reference to a god, (i.e., Lord Indra) first occurs in the 24

“Prologue”.



A chaste woman with only one breast

Stood in the thick shade of the kino

Tree, incandescent in its golden flowers.

Indra, Lord of the immortals with kindred gods

Came down, revealed her loving husband to her...

And before our very eyes led her to heaven. (Prologue, p 20) The Kuravais from the Red Mountains report to the Chera King Cenkuttuvan about the

appearance of Lord Indra in front of Kannaki, who is standing under the shade of Kino trees. Lord Indra reveals to her, her dead husband, Kovalan, and leads her to heaven.

The reference to Lord Siva appears in the “Prologue” as well. The poet Cattana narrates Kannaki’s past to the king and also mentions her transformation into an immortal. Cattana says that right after the destruction of Maturai by Kannaki’s curse, he was resting in the temple of Maturai when he saw Lord Siva appear before Kannaki, overcome by sorrow. Lord Siva blesses Kannaki and tells her that after fourteen days, Kannaki will re-unite with her husband, not in the mortal form but as immortals.

Cattana then replied:

Listen, holy one!

One night, in the ancient city

Of Maturai of immaculate fame, I was resting

In the silver hall of the meeting place

In the temple of Lord Siva, his matted hair

Adorned with the laburnum. It was then I saw

The guardian deity of Maturai appear

Before the awesome Pattini, overcome with sorrow, And speak to her....

(Prologue, p. 20)

The appearances of these gods happen at very crucial times in the plot. The appearance of Lord Siva announces the transformation of Kannaki, from a mortal woman, into an immortal goddess. Lord Indra’s appearance completes this transformation.

The other gods and goddesses are referred to in the epic as a means of comparison. For instance, Kannaki is compared to Kali, King Cenkuttuvan is compared to Indra, Murugan and the god of death.

3.5

HUMAN CHARACTERS IN CILAPPATIKARAN

In section 3.3.2 we listed all the human characters in Cilappatikaran.

However, Kovalan and Kannaki will not be discussed here under human characters as they will be discussed later in Section 3.6 under Immortalised Characters. Apart from the male and female protagonists, the other main human characters in the epic include Matavi (Book of Pukar), the Pantiya King, (Book of Maturai) and King Cenkuttuvan (Book of Vanci). Let us begin our discussion with Matavi.

Matavi: The character of Matavi appears in the “Book of Pukar”. She is described as an accomplished dancer at the Chozha court.

... And from that exalted line

Of heavenly nymphs was Matavi descended.

A woman of flawless birth, of broad shoulders,

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And curly hair, spilling pollen, she was

Noted for her style of great distinction.

(Book of Pukar, Canto 3, p.34)

As discussed earlier on in the Block, the King presents Matavi with a garland made of one thousand and eight pieces of gold. Matavi auctions the garland saying:

A thousand and eight

Of the most excellent gold is this garland worth.

Who buys the garland becomes the husband

Of our vinelike girl.

(Book of Pukar, Canto 3, p 40)

Needless to say, Kovalan buys the garland of a thousand and eight pieces of gold and, as per custom, becomes her husband.

Kovalan bought the garland -

Matavi with wide, lotus eyes. With the hunchback, He entered Matavi's residence: came

Under her spell the instance he took her in his arms.

He forgot himself, and wished never to part from her Forgot his own blameless and noble wife, and home.

(Book of Pukar, Canto 3, p.40)

Kovalan, leaves his wife, Kannaki, and starts living with Matavi. After a few years of blissful romance, there is a misunderstanding between the two of them

– Kovalan and Matavi. Kovalan leaves Matavi and goes back to Kannaki and reconciles with her.

The girl Matavi

Had a lovers's quarrel with Kovalan as they amused Themselves on the cool seashore. Inspired by fate, She sang the songs of the seaside grove

To accompany her dance. Instead of reuniting them, The songs made them drift apart. He returned

To his virtuous wife....

(Canto 27, 63-68)

Matavi, in the meanwhile, gives birth to Kovalan's daughter, Manimekalai.

Ilanko Atikal portrays the character of Matavi in a positive light. She is taught the path of virtue by her mother, owing which Manimekalai her daughter from Kovalan becomes a Buddhist nun instead of becoming a courtesan like her mother Matavi.

Matavi turned

To Manimekalai and said: 'Come here, dear innocent girl,'

And removed her locks of hair braided with flowers.

Enraged, the god of love threw down

His sugarcane bow and his flower arrows.

She entered a Buddhist nunnery and obeyed its rules.

(Book III, Canto 30, 24-29)

She may be a courtesan but she is not responsible for seducing and therefore luring Kovalan away from his wife Kannaki. She is an artist who has knowledge about the fields of music and dance. When Kovalan leaves her, she remains 26



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loyal to him and leads a path of virtue. She is compared to the star Arundhati **The Divine, the Human and**

for her conjugal chastity and loyalty. **B Mangalam** states that, "it is in the **the Immortalised Characters**

in Cilappatikaran

representation of Madhavi that Ilango wins our heart. She is not depicted as the home-breaker or as the other woman... The inventory of Madhavi's jewellery is a splendid catalogue that indicates her aesthetic taste." It is through the character of Matavi that one gets to know about Tamil Nadu's rich cultural heritage - its music, dance, costumes, jewellery and the practices prevalent in the King's court. The mortal Matavi stands in contrast to the immortal Kannaki. According to **Kamil Veith Zvelebil**,

“Kannaki is set into a significant contrast with Matavi: a naive, reticent, unsophisticated upper middle-class girl, in contrast to a literate, cultured, witty, brilliant artiste.”

Pantiya King: The King of Maturai or the Pantiya King is an important character in Book II of the epic. In Book III, his character is described in order to juxtapose him against King Cenkuttuvan, the Chera King. The Pantiya King fails in his Dharma as a king while the Chera king is described as the upholder of justice.

The former persecutes Kovalan without seeking evidence to corroborate the accusation made by the cunning goldsmith. He merely tries to appease his wife and the courtesans. Kannaki, then enters the court, demanding justice. She proves the innocence of her husband in the court. The king dies of guilt, and his death is followed shortly by the queen's demise. After the Pantiyan King and Queen die, Kannaki destroys the city of Maturai.

The Pantiya king who sat

On the lion-throne, with Lakshmi glowing on his breast, Fainted and died,
not knowing what to do

With the ordeal of the woman with fair wreaths.

(Book III, Canto 25, 82-85)

The fate of the King of Maturai projects the concept of Anangu – an aspect of Dharma which ensures a just society. According to Tamil belief, the duty of a just king is to protect a woman's honour and protecting a woman's chastity would keep the sceptre of the king upright. The Pantiya King's sceptre had turned crooked as soon as he had wrongly punished Kovalan. It becomes upright again only after the Pantiya King dies.

Now the king's death has made

The sceptre upright, bent by the inexorable hand Of fate.”

(Book III, Canto 25, 99-100)

King Cenkuttuvan: The Chera king is the focus of the “Book of Vanci”.

The mortal king is responsible for the deification of the mortal-turned-immortal, Kannaki. **B Mangalam** states that;

It is the alliance between the sacred power of Kannaki and the Chera king Senguttuvan that forms the focus in the third book.

One can also state that the Book of Vanci is more about Cenkuttuvan than Kannaki.

The Book of Vanci is set in the Chera kingdom. After burning down the city of Maturai, Kannaki is asked by Lord Siva to go to the Chera Kingdom where she will be able to re-unite with her dead husband. The one-breasted

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*lady is then seen standing under the Kino tree by the Kuravas, the tribesmen of the red mountain. They report her sighting to the Chera king. Cattan, the great Tamil poet apprises the king about Kannaki's past. After hearing about her tragic story, King Cenkuttuvan decides to deify Kannaki by establishing a temple in her honour. He, "recognises Kannaki's sacred power as a chaste wife – as a Pattini – and decides to honor her by building a shrine in his kingdom", as stated by **B Mangalam**. Cenkuttuvan declares that the stone for her idol will be brought from the Himalayas and not the nearby Potiyil hills:*

It does not redound to the good name

Of kings born in our family of fierce swords

And great valor to get a stone

From the Potiyil hills and leave it in the waters Of the Kaveri. In the Himalayas live the Brahmans With matted hair, wet robes,

Three-stringed cords across their chests,

And the power of their three sacrificial fired.

If the king of mountains refuses us the stone

To carve the image of the goddess of chastity,

With garlands of willow around our necks,

We will show the evil men that survived

Our earlier onslaughts the uncertainty of lives (Canto 25, 124-136)

The king's declaration is not only the show of his loyalty and devotion to Kannaki but it is also a show of his might. He challenges the Himalaya, a divine figure: We will rob the Himalaya

Of his crown, radiant like a moon, and glowing

*With the wreath of mantaram flowers strung together With kino blossoms.
We will attend to this.*

(Canto 25, 141-144)

*His valour is comparable to that of the gods, like the warrior god,
Murugan's: King Cenkuttuvan of the fearless sword,*

Born in the illustrious line of the Cerals,

Tore apart the cadamba oak, fenced in

By the immense sea, to the amazement of the gods, (Canto 25, 1-4)

*He is also compared to the king of the gods, Indra: Followed by a train of
women*

*Pressing along the route, he left the environs of Vanci, Appeared like Indra
of the fierce spear*

Who wished to amuse himself with the heavenly women (Canto 25, 10-13)

His army is like the god of death:

Like the god of death, this army

Marches forth with untamed fury.

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(Canto 25, 169-170)



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*Cenkuttuvan orders all the kings to help him in his mission which includes
The Divine, the Human and*

*the great Satavahana king Satakarni: **the Immortalised Characters**
in Cilappatikaran*

Inform

King Satakarni and ask him to get ready

For us a great fleet of boats to cross the holy Ganga.

(Canto 25, 170-172)

*The Aryan kings of the North of the Ganga oppose the Tamil king's
invasion: Opposed by such a warrior*

Uttara, Vicitra, Rudra, Bhairava,

Citra, Simha, Dhanurdhara, Siveta,

*And other northern kings, followed by Kanaka and Vijaya Marched at the
head of an army boundless as the sea.*

(Canto 25, 188-191)

*Cenkuttuvan charges at them like a “famished lion” (Canto 25, 193). A
bloody battle follows and the Ceral king is victorious. He legitimises his
position as the “Great King” (canto 25, 149) or Chakravarti. The
establishment of temple of Kannaki is followed by a “Benediction”, where
subjects of the Chera kingdom, kings and people from others kingdoms
come to pay their respects to the Pattini/ Kannaki, as well as express their
allegiance to Cenkuttuvan.*

The final words of the “Benediction” are by Kannaki herself.

Those who do not worship the holy feet

Of Poraiyan of the great bow will find it

Difficult to bless our lord of the good earth.

The renowned daughter of our king, Kannaki,

Spoke the benediction: ‘May our Cenkuttuvan live forever’.

(Canto 29, Song 29)

She is described as the daughter of the king. Pattini Kannaki is, therefore, a creation of Cenkuttuvan. The final lines of the Book of Vanci declare the synthesis of the mortal and the immortal, of the sacred power of Kannaki and the imperial power of Cenkuttuvan. The mortal Cenkuttuvan seems to be more powerful than the immortal Kannaki. His power is such that he legitimises the position of Kannaki as a goddess, a Pattini, although she was turned into an immortal by the gods already.

*Rather, Cenkuttuvan’s mission of establishing Kannaki as Pattini is a garb under which he implements and achieves his imperialist dreams. He unites the three Tamil-speaking areas – Chera, Chola and Pantiya – under him. It is for this reason that “Cilapattikaram may be justifiably viewed as a national Tamil epic” according to **Kamil Veith Zvelebil**.*

*The fact that King Cenkuttuvan, a mortal, is bestowed with such mighty powers displays the politics of the author. The author, **Illanko Atikal**, is believed to be a Chera prince and King Cenkuttuvan is his brother for whom he abdicates the throne. **Atikal** writes the epic in order to legitimise Cenkuttuvan’s position as the Chera king and in order to generate a sense of respect from the Tamil masses. Puram poetry, an important aspect of Sangam literature, is used to depict King Cenkuttuvan.*



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Cilappatikaran

3.6 THE IMMORTALISED CHARACTERS IN

CILAPPATIKARAN

The transformation of the mortal beings into immortal ones is unique to Cilappatikaram. Kovalan, Valli and Kannaki are three such characters in the epic.

Kovalan: *Kovalan is transformed into an immortal being after his execution by the Pantiyan king. Kannaki burns down the city of Maturai. Kannaki is promised a reunion with her husband in the Chera kingdom. The promise is fulfilled. The transformation of Kovalan and Kannaki is completed in the red mountains of the Chera kingdom. He and Kannaki are taken to heaven.*

However, unlike Kannaki, Kovalan is not deified. His actions as a mortal are recorded.

The mortal Kovalan displays the notion of Karma. After the destruction of the city of Maturai, the goddess of Maturai tells Kannaki that Kovalan's beheading by a drunken soldier is due to his karma in his previous birth.

Kovalan had beheaded an innocent merchant Cankaman in his previous birth.

Kovalan's death in this birth is due to the curse of Cankaman's widow.

*However, Kovalan's karma in his previous and present birth helps Kannaki display her karpu. She accepts Kovalan even though she had been rejected by her husband Kovalan in favour of Matavi. She helps him by giving him her anklets, cilampu. His character, however, remains unexplained. **B Mangalam** states that "Kovalan remains largely colourless and we never*

get to read his mind and motives”.

Valli: *The wife of Lord Murugan is a mortal by birth. She is the daughter of the king of the Kuravai tribe who live in the red mountains of the Chera kingdom. She is the second consort of Murugan. He aggressively woos and courts her.*

You came to our village wearing a cadamba garland And holding a spear for the sake of our girl

But you do not have a fine peacock, the mountain girl Valli, and broad shoulders. The people

Of the small huts, being foolish, will not accept you As the god weathed in a cadamba garland.

(Canto 24, Song 19)

It is after her marriage to Murugan that she is immortalised and given the title of Pattini. Valli is not a character in Cilapattikaram. The tribeswomen, who follow the cult of Murugan, refer to her in their love song. In Canto 24, the friend of the girl in love with a “man from the mountain” seeks the blessings of Valli and Murugan for the successful culmination of the affair: Son of the lord of Mount Kailasa! We adore

Your feet red as asoka flowers and your wife,

Valli, daughter of the mountainfolk, with a crescent On her forehead, the color of peacock.

We ask you to bless our love, marriage with this man.

(Song 16)



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*The mortal Kuravais seem to identify with the immortal Valli, because of her **The Divine, the Human and***

*past association with the tribe. The mortal lovers are inspired by the love affair **the Immortalised Characters***

in Cilappatikaran

between Murugan and Valli as it is also ridden with obstacles as is theirs.

The tribeswomen also begin to identify with Kannaki, whose transformation they have been recently a witness to. They pray to Kannaki: It seems the man from the mountain will marry you.

We will sing a song in honor of the chaste woman Who burned down the glorious city of Maturai

With her breast, who was shown her husband

By a host of gods, and is worshipped by many.”

(Song 22)

Kannaki, like Valli, is transformed into a Pattini from a mortal being. She is the epitome of conjugal love. Nevertheless, the difference between the two of them Kannaki and Valli is that while Kannaki becomes a Pattini because of her love, and the support she gives her truant husband and the fact that her anger and bereavement at the murder of her husband, she was able to evoke such powerful emotions that she managed to burn down the city of Maturai after flinging her left breast towards the city; Valli gets her position as a Pattini on the basis of her relationship with Lord Murugan. She epitomises the virtue of Karpu – because she is the chaste wife of Murugan. She does not exhibit her position dramatically as does Kannaki. Cilappatikaram valorises Kannaki's virtues by comparing her to Valli.

It also marks the beginning of the cult of Kannaki, as the tribeswomen who were followers of the Murugan cult, now begin to pay reverence to Kannaki along with Murugan-Valli.

Kannaki: She is the protagonist of the epic. The title “Cilapattikaram”, i.e., The Tale of the Anklet is associated with her. Kannaki adds to the uniqueness of the epic. Firstly, she is a mortal who is immortalised and deified. Secondly, she is the protagonist of the epic. It is a rarity to find a woman as a protagonist in an epic. *Manimekalai*, the sequel to this epic, is the other epic which has a woman protagonist. Thirdly, she belongs to the merchant class. None of the Sanskrit epics of India or the Greek epics; depict middle class protagonists.

Kannaki is a human figure in the first two books of the epic. The epic opens with her bound in the domestic sphere. She is the ideal of conjugal love, loyalty and chastity. She is wronged by her husband but she takes him back and supports him by giving up her anklets. **B Mangalam** notes; “Kannagi is idealized as the silent, chaste wife in the Book of Pukar.”

It is in Book II that she traverses the private sphere and moves into the public domain. **B Mangalam** states that Kannaki “comes alive in the Book of Maturai as a woman who breaks free of societal barriers”. When Kovalan is killed, she goes to the court of the Pantiyan king, a public domain, and challenges him. An angry Kannaki resembles the divine Chandi or Kali. The image of Chandi or Kali is that of a masculine female, of destructive female sexual energy. She dwells in the public space, outside the ambit of the domestic.

Kannaki too is defiant. **Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan** compares her to Antigone 31



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from the Greek epic. **Sunder Rajan** further assesses her position in the court as a public figure: “When Kannagi confronts the king, it is as the representative of a city, a class, and her sex and as a subject.” Her traversing the public domain from the private associates her “Karpu” as a social order rather than a personal virtue. Her actions exude the edicts of kingly duties. The king of Maturai fails to provide justice and thus bring doom to himself and his kingdom:

By crowned kings the Pantiyan lies condemned.

And before the news reached our ears, it is well He gave up his life.

To forswear tyranny and ensure the welfare

Of his subject is the king’s duty. Born

Of a noble line, suffering is his lot. His throne Is not to be envied.”

(Book III, Canto 25, 97-105)

The Book of Vanci begins with Kannaki’s apotheosis. The Kuravais are a witness to it.

Praised by the gods, she ascended

To heaven.

(Canto 25, 61-62)

They call her a Pattini. Kannaki’s transformation is unlike that of Kovalan.

While Kovalan is immortalised by the gods and taken to heaven after his death; Kannaki’s gets immortalised directly from her human form. She is closer to the goddess Valli, in this regard, thereby, giving her a superior position than her husband. This, further, helps in the projecting the qualities displayed by Kannaki as ideal. Therefore, Kannaki, through her apotheosis into a divine form also manages to subvert patriarchy.

Her apotheosis is, however, completed by King Cenkuttuvan, who in order to establish himself as the ideal king, establishes Kannaki, who embodies the virtues of “Karpu (chastity), Vidamayurchi (perseverance) and needhi (justice)”

(The Hindu Magazine: April 6, 2014: 2) as Pattini in his kingdom. After hearing about Kannaki from the tribesmen and the poet Cattan, King Cenkuttuvan asks his wife:

One chaste woman

Gave up her life the moment her husband died.

Another in a rage came to our kingdom.

Good woman, tell us who is the better of the two?’

When the king asked her, the great queen replied: May the joy heaven wait upon the queen

Who gave up her life before she felt the pain

Of surviving her husband. And may the goddess

Of chastity who has come to our good land be honoured.

(Canto 25, 108-116)

She is honoured by having a temple in her name in the Chera kingdom. Kannaki and Cenkuttuvan collaborate to establish the edicts of kingship and chastity: 32



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Pattini whom the whole world now worships

The Divine, the Human and

Had proved the truth of the Tamil saying:

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“The virtue of women is useless if the king

Rules unjustly.” She made the Cola realize it.

She made the Pantiyan, lord of the south,

Realize, “The king cannot survive if this sceptre Is crooked.” She made the Ceral,

Lord of the west, realize, “The wrath

Of kings will not be appeased till their vows

Are fulfilled, and made known to the kings

Of the north.

(Canto 28, 210-220)

The king in order to fulfil his promise of building a temple for Kannaki begins an expedition to the north to procure the stone for the idol. He wages a gory battle with the Aryan kings in the north. His expedition institutionalises Kannaki as a Pattini. It is he who declares;

Worship

The goddess every day with offerings and festivities.

(Canto 28, 238-239)

As has been already stated, the Book of Vanci is more about King Cenkuttuvan and his expedition to the north. The immortal Kannaki turns into a symbol and is referred to whenever Cenkuttuvan’s kingship is mentioned. He completes Kannaki’s apotheosis by building her a temple. Kannaki and Kovalan’s kins, subjects from various parts of the Chera kingdom and other Tamil kingdoms collect before the temple of the goddess to pay respect to her. This assembly is also the show of strength for the Chera king after his triumphant campaign.

He accomplishes his imperial dreams through the apotheosis of Kannaki: He said, the king offered grants

To the temple of the immortal Pattini who had wrenched off Her breast and set fire to the noisy city. (Canto 30, 145-147) Further, it is reported in Canto 30 that;

Then Cenkuttuvan, the other kings and their strong armies Praised the goddess in impeccable words,

As though they themselves had achieved salvation.

(Canto 30, 162-164)

Therefore, it can be said that Kannaki who subverts patriarchy in Maturai is brought back into its fold through King Cenkuttuvan. Her deification is at the cost of her human identity. She is no longer referred to by her human name, ‘Kannaki’; she is now a Pattini – the goddess of chastity. The power that she had displayed in the court of Maturai is silenced in the Book of Vanci.

She is made the epitome of wifely duties and justice.

Her deification and institutionalisation include the process of myth-making surrounding her. In Canto 30, Matalan, the Brahmin announces: The water

Will not lose its power till the sun and moon

Vanish.

(Canto 30, 63-65)

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She legitimises the Chera king as a great king and obviously there are no voices of dissent.

A voice rose

From the heavens:

‘Your wish is granted.’

(Canto 30, 161-163)

B Mangalam views the apotheosis of Kannaki in terms of her subjugation into the patriarchal domain which renders her silenced. “Kannaki is deified, made into a deity at the cost of total erasure of her human identity. She is no longer referred to by her name. She has become the Pattini goddess.”

The reason for her deification is explained by **B Mangalam** through a feminist perspective. She breaks societal norms by entering the public domain in the Book of Maturai and “Society did not, as it still does not, easily allow women to transgress. It draws them in, either to domesticate them or to deify them.”

The deified Kannaki is humanised through the lamentations of her mother as well as her mother-in-law/ Kovalan’s mother who refers to her as daughter and daughter-in-law. Kannaki’s mother cries:

O my daughter, my partner! When your husband

Abandoned you, I sympathised with you

... My dearest!

Won’t you come back and rid me of my great sorrow?

(Canto 30, 94-98)

Another interpretation of the apotheosis of Kannaki is that the Pattini and the Chera king collaborate to exude the principles of needhi (justice) and karpu (chastity). The final cantos of the Book of Vanci display this synthesis. Kannaki’s benediction to the king shows the confluence of the sacred power and the imperial power.

The transformation of Kannaki from a human to a divine being is wonderfully displayed through the use of Akam and Puram poetry. While Book I has mostly Akam poetry allocated to her, Book II sees the use of Puram for her. This happens when she enters the Maturai court and challenges the king. Since Book III is also an attempt to bring her into the purview of patriarchy, most of the Akam poems are attributed to her and to Valli (only Canto 24). The synthesis of Kannaki and Cenkuttuvan is completed in the last canto of the Book. It is here in Canto 30 that Kannaki is described through Puram poetry. The Book of Vanci therefore, displays the synthesis of the patriarchal and the feminine, the sacred power and the imperial, the human and the divine and finally, the Akam and the Puram.

3.7

LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how the relationship between the divine, human and immortalised characters leads to conclude that the Book of Vanci or rather Cillapatikaram is more about human accomplishments than about religion. A middle class woman, Kannaki's exhibition of the virtue of Karpu in her human 34



*form makes her ascend to the position of goddess. She is superior to her husband **The Divine, the Human and***

*Kovalan owing to her actions. Similarly, King Cenkuttuvan's efforts towards **the Immortalised Characters***

in Cilappatikaran

deifying Kannaki makes him legitimise his position as a Chakravarti and a just ruler. The epic is a celebration of feminine power, through Kannaki's apotheosis and deification. Her deification is also a means by which patriarchy, through King Cenkuttuvan, brings the defiant Kannaki into its fold.

3.8

QUESTIONS

1.

Cilappatikaran has three types/ categories of characterisation. Comment on each category briefly.

2.

How does the poet bring about the transformation of human characters to immortalised characters?

3.

Comment on the main female characters in Cilappatikaran.

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UNIT 4 AKAM AND PURAM POETRY

IN CILAPATTIKARAM

Structure

4.0 Objectives

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Defining Akam and Puram Poetry 4.3 Akam and Puram Thinais & their Corresponding Landscapes 4.4 Akam and Puram in Cilappatikaran 4.5 Let Us Sum Up

4.6 Questions

4.7 Suggested Readings & References

4.0

OBJECTIVES

Since Tamil and in particular Sangam Literature is a relatively new area for most of us we will be detailing what the powerful and poignant akam

and puram poetic forms are in general and in Cilappatikaran in particular. In this unit we will look at what akam and puram mean, study akam and puram forms along with their corresponding landscapes, and then look at instances of akam and puram in the Cilappatikaran in detail. Let us begin by tracing the history of akam and puram in Sangam poetics.

4.1

INTRODUCTION

An important feature of Sangam literature is the use of the poetic form.

According to the ancient Tamil treatise, Tholkappiyam, poetry's subject matter is categorised under two heads: Akam and Puram. These two are mutually related in terms of being the opposite of the other and simultaneously complementing each other.

Akam stands for the interior, the individual, the feminine, and the varied phases of love. Women dominate the Akam. Puram stands for the exterior, the world, the masculine, violence and heroism. It is male-dominated.

Kamil Veith Zvelebil describes the two forms in the following words:

... in the early classical poems, which have been termed hedonistic and egalitarian in spirit, whose length varies from three to over eight hundred lines, and which often go under the now 'popular' term Sangam poetry, the religious inspiration and the philosophical reflection are almost totally absent. These were poems of 'sentiments' and of

'exploits' of the 'noumenon' and the 'phenomenon', in Tamil terminology, of Akam and Puram; in a somewhat simplified manner we may also say, poems of a total human erotic experience, and of heroism and public activity.

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Let us define akam and puram next.



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DEFINING AKAM AND PURAM POETRY

in Cilappatikaran

The contents of Akam and Puram poetry is located in terms of mutal – the first themes which are that of time and place, of karu – the seed theme that indicates the relationship between human beings and the world, and between society at large and uri – the essential theme that reflects the various phases of love and war. The mutal is further divided into Thinais. They are seven in number in both the Akam and the Puram.

There are five akam thinais, also known as Aintinai, and are named after the local flora and fauna. In akam poetry, the Aintianis are: Kurinchi, Mullai, Marutam, Neytal and Palai. The other two Akam thinais, Kaikkilai (unrequited love) and Perunthinai (mismatched love or lust), are considered to be inappropriate subjects for poetry. Similarly, in puram poetry, six out of the seven thinais are named after flowers/trees and indicate military situations.

S Murali points out that the categorisation of the environment into the thinais should be seen as “the earliest attempt by the Sangam poets towards the formulation of an environmental aesthetics, where the human bhava seeks its correspondence in the natural vibhava. ”

Commenting upon the use of natural landscape in akam poetry, **Xavier S Thani Nayagam** states that:

Akam poetry had to consider as its essential theme one of the five aspects of love poetry, choose an appropriate situation and write with the prescribed landscape, the annual season and the period of the day pertinent to the division. The poet had to be particular about choosing similes and metaphors from objects exclusive to the region.

The objects were: the gods, food, fauna, flora, music and other objects indigenous to the region. By way of exception, the flora or birds or any of the other objects of one region might not be mentioned in a poem of another region for even nature is not rigorous in her natural divisions to be so exclusive. This mixing of regional objects was permitted and was known as “regional interchange”.

Puram poems though are easier as their themes are foregrounded in the objective. Let's look at akam and puram thinais and their corresponding landscapes next.

4.3 AKAM & PURAM THINAIS & THEIR

CORRESPONDING LANDSCAPES

The Akam and Puram thinais along with their corresponding landscapes are listed below:

The thinai concept has social and historical significance. According to P T

Srinivasa Iyengar, the concept of the thinai illustrates the evolution of civilisation: “All these five kinds of natural regions are found in the Tamil country, though on a small scale and as the South Indian spread from region to region he developed the stages of culture which each region was calculated to produce.” According to him, the thinai concept reveals the spread of Tamils from the hills and mountains to the lowlying plains.”

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Cilappatikaran

Akam

Puram

Landscape

Thinai

Flowers/

Phases in Love

Thinai

Flower/

Military

trees

tree

Situation

Hills

Kurinci

Cone

Clandestine meeting Vetki

Scarlet

Cattle

Head

of lovers

Ixora

raiding

Pastureland

Mullai

Jasmine

Waiting in hope

Vanci

Indian

Invasion

and open

Willow

terraces

Riverine-

Marutam

Arjuna

Wife's sulking/

Ulinai

Balloon

Siege

agrarian

tree

infidelity of man

Vine

Littoral

Neytal

Dark Lily

Lamenting/anxiety

Tumpai

White

Pitched

for husband's return Tumpai

Dead

battle

Nettle

Uncultivated

Palai

Ivory

Parting/ lover's

Vakai

Sirissa

Victory

Dry Region

departure in search Kanci

Tree

of wealth or

knowledge

Kaikkilai

Unrequited love

Kanci

Portia

Impermanence

Tree

of life

Perunthinai

Mismatched love/

Patan

Not

Praise

lust

Specified

of kings

Ramachandra Dikshithar saw the *thinai* concept as a clue to the pre-history of South India. **A K**

Ramanujam says, (the) “actual objective of landscapes of Tamil country became the interior landscapes of Tamil poetry.” He also states that the “real world was always kept in sight and included in the symbolic.”

The Akam and Puram domains encapsulate varied human experiences in historical time and place. Akam poems depict various phases of and situations in love. Women’s voices are predominantly heard though they remain anonymous. In fact, in Akam poetry, the speakers are identified by their relationship. No proper names are mentioned. One witnesses the girl, her friend, mother, foster mother, the lover, the husband, the concubine, the wife addressing each other or speaking within earshot of the other. The poems are short, pithy, moving dramatic monologues that manage to pierce through the listener’s and reader’s heart.

In the Puram domain, it is the men – the king, the soldiers – who dominate and the women are only thankful that they are their mothers or wives. The heroes are referred to by their names, identities are revealed and celebrated. Apart from their battle wounds, kings are hailed for their charity, munificence and generous patronage of court poets in Puram poetry. There are Puram poems that stress upon the transience of life, impermanence of earthly glory and the levelling of the king and the commoner.

4.4

AKAM AND PURAM IN CILAPPATIKARAN

Cilappatikaram uses the unique non-Sanskritic poetic sequence that incorporates Iyal (poetry), Isai (music) and Natakam (dance) and is interspersed with prose sections. The epic in Tamil consists of 5730 lines in 38



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akaval meter and is said to have been composed around the 5th Century CE.

Akam and Puram Poetry *The text also uses kali and venpa meters. The prose pieces are considered in **Cilappatikaran***

to be one of the earliest in Tamil poetry.

The Book of Pukar has 10 cantos and is situated in Pukar in the Chola kingdom. Since the Book is about the conjugal life of Kannaki - Kovalan and the love affair between Matavi - Kovalan, the Akam form of poetry is used. The Neytal thinai is invoked in cantos 6 and 7. It is here that the misunderstanding between Matavi and Kovalan occur. Palai thinai is used in canto 10, where the bankrupt and repentant Kovalan and his wife Kannaki leave Pukar without informing their parents.

The two women, Kannaki and Matavi, in this book depict their moral ethics through Akam poetry. Kannaki owing to her fidelity, patience and chastity depicts the supreme value of karpu. Meanwhile, Matavi is also presented in a positive light as a chaste woman, though not equal to Kannaki.

The Book of Maturai focuses on Kannaki and Kovalan's journey to Maturai and their quest for their karma. Puram is invoked when Kannaki enters the court of the Pantiya king after the execution of her husband on the false accusation of theft. She proves her husband's innocence in the open court.

Kannaki with simmering eyes and dishevelled hair, holding her anklet is compared to Kali:

Pent up with hatred and anger

At the loss of her husband, she stands at the gate, a golden anklet in her hand.

The king dies of guilt. The queen dies of shock at the loss of her husband. Kannaki curses the entire city of Maturai. She wrenches off her left breast and flings it on the city of Maturai. She addresses Agni, the god of fire:

Brahmans, good men, cows, chaste women,

the old and children – spare these. Go after the wicked.

*Kannaki's chastity becomes her power. According to **B Mangalam**, "Silenced and controlled by patriarchal institutions, Kannagi unleashes her sexual energy into a powerful tool of interrogation and subsequent annihilation of the unjust, the adharma, the untruth."*

She transgresses into the public domain. This transgression is depicted through the use of Puram poetry. She was the forgiving wife in the Book of Pukar.

She takes her disloyal husband back and helps him by giving up her anklets for him to sell. However, in the Book of Maturai, she is vengeful and punishing.

*Therefore, Kannaki, who in the Book of Pukar is depicted through Akam is now in the Puram domain. **B Mangalam** says that; "Kannagi, the silent, chaste wife, cloistered within the Akam domain, now invades the public/*

Puram domain and challenges the king and proves in the open court that her husband was not a thief."

It is in the Book of Maturai that Kannaki's apotheosis into a deity begins.

She is a middle class woman in the first book. In the second, she is promised to be made into an immortal. This transition is depicted through her movement into the Puram domain from the Akam. The apotheosis is complete in the Book of Vanci. This book shows the synthesis of the private/ Akam and the public/

*Puram domains. **B Mangalam** states that "Kannagi's traversing from Akam to Puram is a fascinating journey." It is here that the silent chaste wife of the Book of Pukar is silenced again through her deification in the Book of Vanci.*

The Book of Vanci begins in the Akam tradition. Canto 24, "The Round Dance of the Hill Dwellers", has short lyrics in the Kurinchi thinai. Spoken by 'she'

and her woman friend –

"her friend speaks to her"

"she speaks to her friend"

– with 'He' sometimes within earshot. The lyrics are about the woman's relationship with her beloved, "the man from the high mountain". This canto reflects the various phases of love. The friend of the woman in love encourages her to bathe in the waterfall:

We will bathe in the mountain waterfall

That sparkles and flows, bright as Indra's bow, A blend of powders: the kohl, musk and sindura.

(2)

The woman in love tells her friend that because of her strange behaviour, the villagers doubt that she is possessed by spirit:

The village gossip thinks I am possessed by Katampan.

She has called the shaman to perform dance

To rid me of this illness caused by the man

From the cool mountain on which peppercorns grow.

(11)

As the two women speak, the man is within earshot:

*Our man from the mountain with a fragrant garland Hid himself and was
all ears as we sang.*

(19)

The woman expresses her fear of separation to her lover: The people

*Of the small huts, being foolish, will not accept you As the god wreathed in
a cadamba garland.*

(20)

*The friend assures the woman that there will be a successful culmination of
her love:*

It seems the man from the mountain will marry you.

(21)

*Canto 24 and these poems in the Kurinchi thinai end with prayers to the
newly transformed Pattini Kannaki for the fruition of their love: We will
sing a song in honor of the chaste woman Who burned down the glorious
city of Maturai*

With her breast.

(21)

*The women do the Kuravai dance, usually dedicated to Lord Murugan and
Valli, while singing in praise of Kannaki. They also pay respect to their
king, Cenkuttuvan:*

*In the same way, our lover will come to this place While we sing our songs
and perform*

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*The round dance. May the king of the west country Who ruled over the
Kolli hills*

And inscribed his bow-emblem on the Himalaya

Live in endless joy in the days to come.

(26)

Kannaki as the symbol of chastity and fidelity is the right one to seek blessings from for, the success of a relationship. These Akam poems indicate the merging of the Murugan cult with the newly anointed cult of Kannaki. Reference to Kannaki and Cenkuttuvan by the lovers foreshadow the synthesis of the virtues of chastity and kingship which occurs in the last canto of the Book of Vanci.

Canto 25, "The Choice of the Stone" delves into the heroic/ masculine domain as the narrative shifts from Kannaki and the hill dwellers to King Cenkuttuvan.

The Puram genre is now invoked. The king learns about Kannaki from the hill dwellers and the poet Cattan. He decides to build a temple for her and thereby, officially declare her as the Pattini. It is from canto 25 onwards, that the narrative becomes more about Cenkuttuvan than Kannaki. Kannaki becomes the silent deity while Cenkuttuvan, the symbol of patriarchal authority, institutionalises her and also legitimises his authority as a king.

Canto 25 begins with the Puram thinai, i.e, Vanci. Vanci thinai describes the preparation for war.

Here, King Cenkuttuvan's chivalry during war is described. He is compared to Lord Indra:

Followed by a train of women

*Pressing along the route, he left the environs of Vanci, Appeared like Indra
of the fierce spear....*

(10-12)

Further,

He mounted his great elephant,

And his train wound to a distance

Of twelve hundred and sixty miles

(15-17)

Also,

After setting fire to the enemy's camp,

The imperishable fame achieved by feeding

His soldiers, and the prowess of a king on the eve of battle.

*He ordered his troops to put on their battledress And wreaths of unbroken
palm leaves*

(150-154)

The Vanci thinai is accompanied with the Korravanci thurai (theme), here.

*The function of the Korravanci thurai is to praise the king who destroys his
enemy valiantly in the battlefield. Lines 157 to 173 of Canto 25 are in the
Korravanci thurai. For example,*

Villavan Kotai,

His minister, the said:

May your upright rule

Last for many years! On the bloodstained field

Of Konkan you routed your equals

Who forfeited their banners with the emblems of

the tiger and the fish

(159-162)

Another example,

We cannot forget

Your courage when you escorted your mother

To bathe in the swollen Ganga, and fought alone 41



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Against a thousand Aryas that the cruel god

Of death was stunned.

(167-171)

This canto also refers to the Vallai song: “the vallai song of those who pounded grain”. These are songs in praise of a heroic figure and are sung by women while working in the fields, winnowing or gathering grains.

Canto 26, “Removing the Stone” uses the Tumpai thinai. This thinai is used for the description of the battle. The king engages in a violent battle with the Aryan kings of the North. The descriptions are that of gore and are blood curdling:

With gleaming tusks, and by swift horsemen,

Smothered the battlefield, blinded people,

Made hoarse the throats of bells suspended

From the necks of war elephants, and choked

The far-sounding conches of the standard bearers, And stopped them from adding to the terror.

(210-215)

As the king destroys his enemies, he is described as a famished lion. Such descriptions are typical of the Tumpai thinai:

As a famished lion

Stalking for prey rejoices at the sight

Of a herd of elephants, so did Cenkuttuvan rejoice Seeing his foes march towards him. Weathers

In a garland of Portia, he hurled his troops

Against the enemy.

(193-198)

His wrath and thirst for blood makes him equivalent to the god of death: On his head he now wore a wreathed of white

Dead nettle, braided with palm leaves,

And appeared on the battlefield to the Arya king Like the god of death himself, riding a buffalo And devouring all the lives in a span of a day.

(230-234)

The descriptions get gorier as the goblins begin to celebrate the violence and feast on the dead bodies of both the camps:

With crowned heads for an oven,

Broken heads for pans, shoulder blades for ladles, The goblin chef fed all the goblins. Smacking

Their lips, they gave thanks:

“May the king

Of the upright sceptre who fought and won

This just battle live forever.”

The description of the victory of the Chera king is also described in terms of gore. Such a portrayal becomes significant because it subtly goes on to question the effectiveness of war. The Chera king may be victorious but the celebration by the goblins makes this victory a damp affair. **Illango Atikal**, as a Jaina ascetic, therefore, questions the need for such violence in order to defend Dharma. Or rather, he forces us to question whether it is legitimate to camouflage the violent imperialist tendencies with the cause of Dharma. This is done through the Puram form. **B Mangalam** states that; “Even as Illango follows the Puram literary conventions, his message of non-violence and 42



renunciation of evil gets reiterated in each of the three books of the epic

Akam and Puram Poetry through the Jaina precepts that lie at the core of the poem.”

in Cilappatikaran

Canto 27 titled as “The Lustration”, sums up the preceding narrative and simultaneously pushes the plot forward. It, therefore, moves both in the Akam and the Puram domains.

The Queen of Vanci learns that the King is on his way back from the war.

She begins to make preparations for his welcome. These descriptions are made through the Kurinchi thinai in the Akam domain: A flowery canopy topped the golden harem.

Made by expert hands, it was decorated

With strings of pearls and flowers, and blazed

With the glitter of diamonds and gems fastened

By gold thread.

(217-221)

The king and the queen will be re-united again. The queen dresses up to welcome him with the help of her maids:

Renounce your sorrow at the parting

Of your dear lord.

The dwarfs and hunchbacks

Came up to her and said:

Let beauty reappear.

The noble lord is come. Brighten up

Your fragrant hair with everyday ornaments.

(227-232)

This canto also re-narrates the story of Kannaki. Matalan informs the king about Kannaki, Kovalan and Matavi. These descriptions of their domestic lives, describing various phases of love, delve into the Akam: The girl Matavi

Had a lover's quarrel with Kovalan as they amused Themselves in the cool seashore. Inspired by fate, She sang the songs of the seaside grove

To accompany her dance. Instead of reuniting them, The songs made them drift apart.

(64-69)

The news of Kovalan and Kannaki's death, leads to the death of Kavunti, Kannaki's mother and of Kovalan's mother: And she (Kavunti) moaned: 'Was this the fate of those Who were my companions?' She vowed to starve

Herself to death. So ended her life.

(95-97)

Kovalan's mother gives up her life:

His wife too, reeling from the shock

Of her son's terrible death, gave up her life.

(110-111)

*The others, Kovalan's father and Kannaki's father, give up their wealth:
When Kovalan's father heard of what had become*

*Of his son and daughter-in-law and also of the just king Of Maturai, he
was distraught. He gave away*

*All his wealth and entered the sevenfold monastery of Indra. (103-107)
Matavi and her daughter Manimekalai renounce their material life and
enter the Jaina monastery:*

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I must now lead a virtuous life.

*Manimekalai should be spared the life of a courtesan Which is full of
troubles.*

Her hair, wreathed in flowers,

She removed, and entered a Buddhist nunnery

(117-120)

*The reference to death continues in Puram poems also. The Pantiya King
offers the sacrifice of one thousand goldsmiths to Pattini to absolve the
kingdom of the sin committed by the goldsmith who had implicated*

Kovalan falsely: O Poraiyan! A wreath of palm leaves

You wore to celebrate the success of your sword, Brandished in your right hand, in tearing apart The margosa tree guarded by the Palaiyan.

Be gracious enough to listen to me.

The victorious Ver-Celiyan, ruler of Korkai,

Offered a sacrifice of one thousand goldsmiths

In a single day to the goddess Pattini

Who had wrenched off one of her breasts.

(137-145)

Through the references to death in both the Akam and the Puram domains, the author seems to underscore the Jaina precepts of renunciation and transience of life. Canto 27 also describes the valour and the righteousness of the Chera king through the Puram domain:

O King

Of the vast world, may you live forever!

In a day you broke the nine parasols

Of nine kings who had formed a league

Against your cousin, Killivalavan.

(129-133)

Canto 28, "The Dedication of the Memorial Stone" adheres to the Kanchi thinai of the Puram genre. Matalan counsels the king about the uncertainty of life and asks him to conduct sacrifices and other rituals for spiritual power: O just king! It is unnecessary to remind men

Of wisdom that youth will not last forever. O guardian king!

Lakshmi resides in your chest through you see

Your body covered with grey hair. Souls

In divine bodies are often reborn in human bodies, And souls in human bodies may be reborn

In animals.

(159-165)

And,

The king of the loud anklets, invited

Sacrificial priests, instructed by teachers

Expert in the four Vedas. They were asked

To begin the festival of rites as advised

By Matalan.

He ordered the Arya kings

Removed from prison and taken outside the city

Of Vanci of great renown to Velavikko Palace,

Enclosed by ponds and cool groves.

(192-196)

*It is in canto 28 that the synthesis of Kannaki as a Pattini and King
Cenkuttuvan begins. The virtues of Chastity (Karpu) and Kingship merge.*

44



The virtue of women is useless if the king

Akam and Puram Poetry Rules unjustly. She made the Cola realize it.

in Cilappatikaran

She made the Pantiyan, lord of the south

Realize, “The king cannot survive if his sceptre Is crooked.” She made the Ceral,

Lord of the west, realize, “The wrath

Of kings will not be appeased till their vows

Are fulfilled and made known to the kings

Of the north.”

(212-213)

This synthesis is well depicted through the alternation between Akam and Puram. The synthesis, however, leads to the absorption of Kannaki into the patriarchal domain of King Cenkuttuvan. She is deified by Cenkuttuvan and she in turn goes on to legitimise the rule of king Cenkuttuvan as ideal.

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Mangalam states that “The cult of Pattini is thus institutionalised. Her worship is ritualised and authorised by the king’s decree. While the king is eager to partake of Pattini’s sacred power, her deification is legitimised by the King’s authority. The symbiotic power assumes awe and power in the eyes of the subjects and other kings alike.”

Canto 29 titled as “Benediction” contains both prose and poetry section. The Preface is a prose piece which summarises the past happenings of the text.

The poetry section is in the Akam form. They are in the form of lamentations by the relatives of Kannaki – Tevanti, the foster mother and close friend.

Cenkuttuvan, Kannaki and the girls of Vanci also speak. The close friend and the foster mother remain anonymous. Their words are a reminder to the readers about the virtues of chastity, perseverance and justice – the ideals the Pattini goes on to symbolise and, the Jaina value of renunciation.

The poetic section begins with an introduction of the speakers – Tevanti, Foster Mother and the Close Friend. They introduce themselves as a relative of Kannaki. Tevanti says:

Know me as the friend of the woman of the Cola

country

(2)

The Foster Mother says:

Know me as the foster mother of the woman of cool Pukar

(3)

The close friend says;

But followed her husband as a dutiful wife

Know me as the friend of the woman of PumPukar

(4)

They also go on to inform the listeners/audience/readers about the fate of some of the close relatives of Kannaki and Kovalan. Tevanti while lamenting before the image of Kannaki says:

The day your mother

heard of the troubles your torn-off breast had caused, O woman with beautiful locks of hair,

She died of grief...

Your mother-in-law too died?

(5)

The Foster Mother says:

Macattuvan heard of the evil done to Kovalan



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Cilappatikaran

*By the wretched man, and of the death
Of the guardian king. He lost heart
And wished he were dead. He gave away
His wealth and renounced the world.*

(6)

The Close Friend introduces Manimekalai:

*Matavi...went to the sages
That live under the bo tree, gave away her wealth, And entered a
nunnery...
And did you also hear, friend,
Of the renunciation of Manimekalai?*

(7)

*Cenkuttuvan's words are a description of the vision that he has of the
Goddess: Of a lightning figure with gold anklets,
A girdle, bangles round her arms, earrings
And other ornaments of pure gold.*

(9)

Kannaki appears next and her words are a reiteration of her assimilation

into the patriarchal fold. The Pantiya king, whose authority she had challenged and subverted in the Book of Maturai, is now forgiven by the Pattini. Their relationship is that of a father and a daughter.

Blameless is the Pantiyan, now an honoured guest In the palace of the king of the gods.

I am his daughter. I am going to play

On Venvelan's hill.

(10)

The girls of Vanci sing in praise of Pattini. They sing in praise of the "Tennavan's daughter" (11) and also praise the Chera dynasty: We shall praise Vanavan.

Let the gods praise the king of the Vaiyai

(12)

The Pantiya king is also blessed and thereby absolved of his sin of being unjust: Let us praise the king who gave up his life

Burned by the tears of the woman

Who suffered the outcome of past fate.

(13)

These stanzas are followed by the Song of the Wooden Ball (16-19), the Song of the Ball (20-22), the Song of the Swing (23-25), the Song of the Pestle (26-28). These songs are a celebration of the political power of the Tamil empire.

The Chola, Chera and Pantiya dynasties are praised in these songs.

The final stanza of the Canto is a synthesis of the sacred power of Kannaki and the imperial power of Cenkuttuvan.

Canto 30 titled "The Granting of a Favor" completes the deification Kanniki.

Cenkuttuvan institutionalises Kannaki as Pattini. The canto describes the value of renunciation, through the example set by Manimekalai. The Puram thinai Kanchi is used here.

She then told him of Manimekalai's great Renunciation.

(8-9)

***Illango Atikal's** renunciation is also narrated here by Tevantikai: In the elegant audience hall*

46



Of the ancient city of Vanci, you were seated

Akam and Puram Poetry** Beside your father. When the astrologer predicted in **Cilappatikaran

You would inherit the throne, you disapproved of him To relive the pain of Cenkuttuvan

(169-174)

The Kanchi thinai is also used to talk about the prevailing beliefs in the cycle of birth and death as well as in the organic, casual principle of Karma: Good and bad

Actions have their own reward. Those who are born Die, and those who die are reborn. Old truths, these.

(134-136)

The canto seems to bind the Akam and Puram together. It ends with instructions for men and women which hold good in both the public and the private worlds: Do not hurt any living thing

be charitable and do penance ...

Do not give false evidence ...

Uphold domestic virtues ...

Youth, wealth and the body

Are unstable... Few are the days of your fate....

(185-198)

It thereby, goes on to complete the synthesis of the sacred power and the imperial power, the Kannaki and Cenkuttuvan, the feminine and the masculine.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

The use of the Akam and Puram forms is strategic in Cilappatikaram. It helps in exemplifying the main theme of the epic – the signification of Karpu and the ideals of kingship. In this block we looked at the beginnings of Sangam Literature and Cilappatikaram's place in it. We developed an understanding of Tamil Literature, looked at the powerful female characters in the epic, the Jain elements in Cilappatikaram, and the two poetic elements of akam and puram as used in the epic.

4.6

QUESTIONS

1.

Attempt a literary history of Classical Literature in Sanskrit and Tamil.

2.

Examine the conventions of akam and puram poetry.

3.

Attempt a comparison between the use of metaphors and suggestions in Sanskrit aesthetics and in Tamil poetics.

4.

Examine the politics of gender, relations and the patriarchal authority of the King in the epic.

5.

Analyse the character of Kannagi as the woman protagonist of the epic.

6.

Write a brief essay on the cult of Pattini.

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